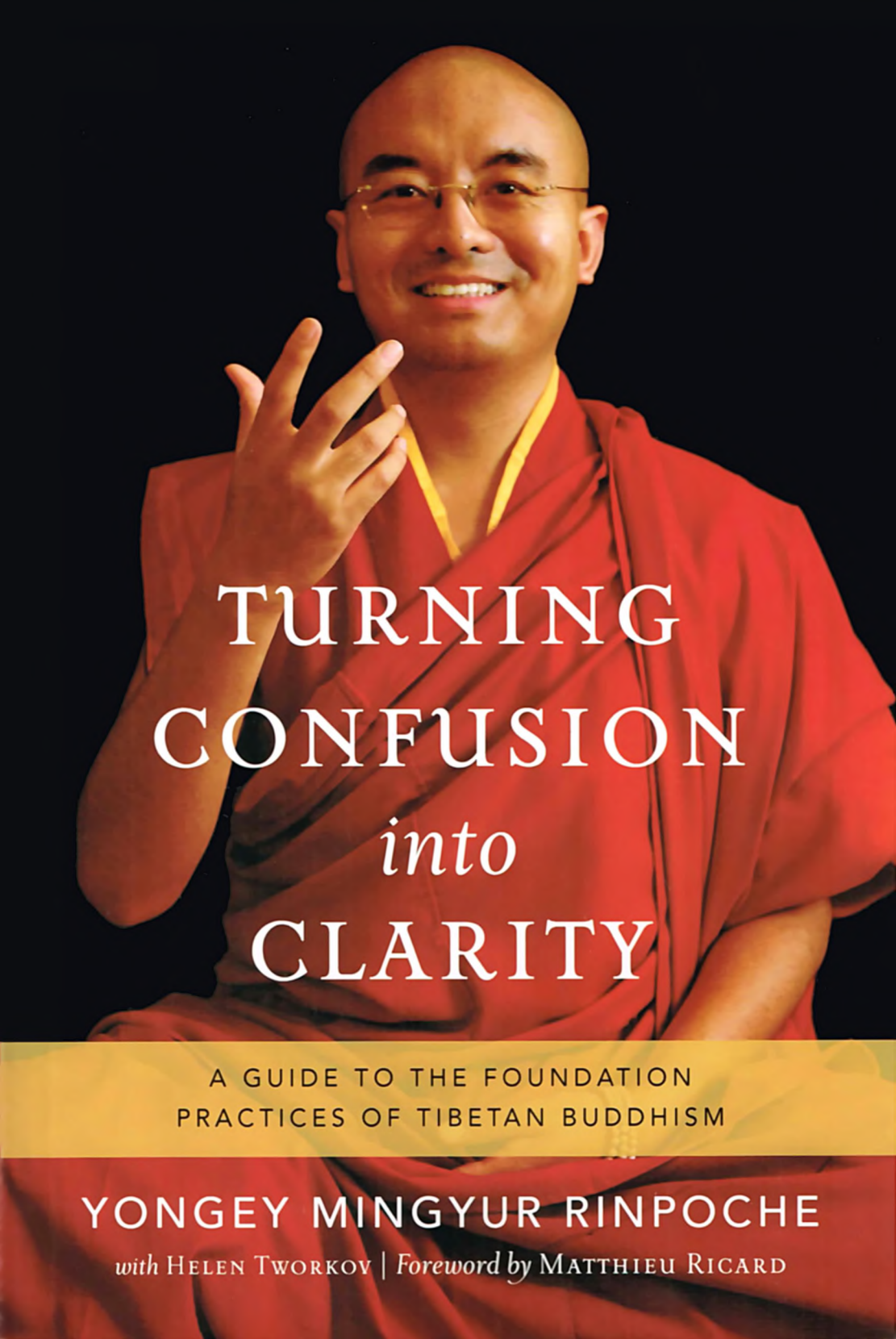

TURNING CONFUSION *into* CLARITY

A GUIDE TO THE FOUNDATION PRACTICES OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE

with HELEN TWORKOV | *Foreword by* MATTHIEU RICARD

VISIT…

Turning Confusion into Clarity

Books by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret & Science of Happiness. With Eric Swanson. New York: Harmony, 2007.

Joyful Wisdom: Embracing Change and Finding Freedom. With Eric Swanson. New York: Harmony, 2009.

For further teachings by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, including audio and video teachings on the foundation practices of Tibetan Buddhism, visit www.store.tergar.org.

Turning Confusion into Clarity

A Guide to the Foundation Practices of Tibetan Buddhism

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche
with Helen Tworkov

Foreword by Matthieu Ricard

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Foreword

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche is both one of my teachers and the heart-son of several of my root spiritual masters. So it seems somewhat out of place for me to write a foreword to his profound teaching, just as it is unnecessary to use a flashlight in midday. In view of this, what follows is more of an offering to his wisdom and to the lineage masters.

In *The Joy of Living,* Mingyur Rinpoche writes: "One of the main obstacles we face when we try to examine the mind is a deep-seated and often unconscious conviction that 'we're born the way we are and nothing we can do can change that.' I experienced this same sense of pessimistic futility during my own childhood, and I've seen it reflected again and again in my work with people around the world. Without even consciously thinking about it, the idea that we can't alter our mind blocks our every attempt to try .... [However,] during my conversations with scientists around the world, I've been amazed to see that there is a nearly universal consensus in the scientific community that the brain is structured in a way that actually does make it possible to effect real changes in everyday experience."

This blending of personal testimonies, insight into people's minds, and enthusiastic openness to contemporary understanding are some of the hallmarks of Mingyur Rinpoche's unique ease in presenting the deepest teachings of Buddhism along with issues that are relevant to our modern world. In *Turning Confusion into Clarity,* Rinpoche applies these wonderful skills. He gives us comprehensive teachings on the foundation practices that contain instructions indispensable for undertaking these practices in a traditional and authentic way. What is very

special, however, is that these traditional instructions are interspersed with inspiring memories, stories of great masters, and intimate insights into Rinpoche's own spiritual path, thus bringing the teachings fully alive.

It is also significant that in this book Rinpoche has chosen to give extensive instructions on the foundation practices when so many practitioners today thirst for so-called advanced teachings. Yet as Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche (1904–87) wrote, "The birth of understanding in your mind stream of the meaning of the Great Perfection depends upon these foundational practices."

This view echoes those of all the great masters of the past. Drigung Jigten Gonpo (1143–1217), for example, said, "Other teachings consider the main practice profound, but here it is the preliminary practices that we consider profound."

For readers of this book, this sound foundation will make the subsequent practices flow naturally into place. Without the foundation practices, however magnificent subsequent practices might seem, their fate is no different than that of a castle built on the surface of a frozen lake. Just as the castle will undoubtedly sink as soon as the warmth of spring arrives, the lofty views of those who feel they can dispense with the foundation practices will collapse as soon as outer circumstances become challenging. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–91) often said, "It is easy to be a good meditator when sitting in the sun with a full belly. It is when faced with adverse conditions that the meditator is put to the test."

Someone once came to visit Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche, Khyentse Rinpoche's grandson, to discuss his difficulties. The visitor began by saying how well his practice of the Great Perfection was going and how great it was to simply "remain in the view." Then he added: "But you know, I can't stand being at that dharma center. People are so mean and I can't get along with them." When Rabjam Rinpoche suggested that on such occasions he might try practicing teachings on mind training, the man replied, "Oh, that is really difficult." So this person thought that it was easy to practice the most profound teaching, which is the

culmination of the Buddhist path, but found it too challenging to put in application the teachings that we are supposed to begin with.

After the man left, Rabjam Rinpoche recalled that the great yogi Shabkar Tsodruk Rangdrol (1781–1851) had said about such cases: "There are people who pretend they can chew stones, but can't chew butter."

In his autobiography Shabkar adds: "These days some people say, 'There is no need to expend great effort on the preliminary practices. What's the point of so much complication? It's enough just to practice Mahamudra, devoid of all elaborations.' Don't listen to such nonsense. How can someone who hasn't even reached the shore talk about the sea?"

So, where can we start? To truly set out in a meaningful way on the road to transformation, we have to first take a close look at ourselves. We could ask: What am I doing with my life? What have been my priorities until now? What can I do with the time I have left to live? Of course these thoughts only make sense if we feel that change is both desirable and possible. Do we think, "Nothing needs to be improved in my life and the world around me"? Is change possible? It is up to each of us to decide.

The next question is, in what direction do we want to change? If we try to climb the social or corporate ladder to become rich or have more pleasure, are we quite sure that these things, if we can achieve them, will bring lasting fulfillment? At this crossroad, when we are asking what our goals should really be, we need to be honest with ourselves and not satisfied with superficial answers.

The answer that Buddhism provides is that our human life is extremely precious. The disillusionment that comes over us at times does not mean that life is not worth living. However, we have not yet clearly identified what makes it meaningful.

The teachings of the great Buddhist masters are not random recipes. They are real guides that spring from the living experience of experts in the spiritual path who possess extraordinary knowledge and understand clearly the mechanisms that produce happiness and suffering.

We tend to say, "First I will take care of my current business and finish all my projects, and when that's all done, I'll see more clearly and be able to devote myself to spiritual life." But to think like that is fooling ourselves in the worst way. As Jigme Lingpa (1729–98) wrote in *Treasury of Spiritual Qualities:*

> Tormented by the summer's heat, beings sigh with pleasure
> In the clear light of the autumn moon.
> They do not think, and it does not alarm them,
> That a hundred of their days have passed away.

So, instead of letting time slip by like sand pouring through our fingers, we should heed Milarepa's (ca. 1052–ca. 1135) song:

> Fearing death, I went into the mountains.
> Through meditating on the uncertainty of when it will come,
> I conquered the immortal bastion of the unchanging.
> Now, my fear of death is long gone!

When hermits repeat the magic mantra "I need nothing," they are trying to rid themselves of the endless distractions that take over the mind and leave them with the bitter taste of lost time. They want to unclutter their lives in order to devote themselves completely to what is truly enriching. As one of Mingyur Rinpoche's teachers, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche (1932–99), told us: "The mind is very powerful. It can create happiness or suffering, heaven or hell. If, with the help of the dharma, you manage to eliminate your inner poisons, nothing from outside will ever affect your happiness, but as long as those poisons remain in your mind, you will not find the happiness you seek anywhere in the world."

My own root teacher, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, constantly gave teachings on these practices as well. Just before he left for Bhutan, where he passed away in 1991, the last teaching he gave in his room at Shechen Monastery in Nepal was precisely the foundation practices.

As someone who has been greatly inspired by the instructions given

in this book, I encourage you to study and practice it. Now, let Mingyur Rinpoche's words speak for themselves.

Matthieu Ricard
Shechen Monastery
Boudanath, Nepal
April 2013

Acknowledgments

In 2004, Mingyur Rinpoche gave teachings on the foundation practices of Tibetan Buddhism in Vancouver, British Columbia. I would like to thank Alex Campbell for transcribing these talks, which provided the initial groundwork for this book, and for his continued support of this project. Subsequent material came from interviews that I conducted with Mingyur Rinpoche between 2009 and 2011.

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From beginning to end, Cortland Dahl's knowledge of traditional Tibetan texts on the foundation practices combined with his wisdom and his devotion to Mingyur Rinpoche made his contribution of paramount importance. I wish to gratefully acknowledge his collaboration—and his enduring patience.

In June 2011, Mingyur Rinpoche began a solitary retreat for an extended period of time, entrusting his students to continue the work that he had initiated. For all the critical attention paid to these pages, many aspects remain informed by my understanding of Rinpoche's words, therefore any errors that may exist are mine alone.

To Mingyur Rinpoche, I offer my deepest appreciation for his unconditional kindness and for the opportunity to work with him. And as one who has benefited so much from his teachings, I would like to take a suggestion that he makes at the end of the book when he asks us, the readers, to consider dedicating anything that we have learned to others:

"Just as with the practice itself, we don't want to keep the merit and wisdom for ourselves, or to use dharma to add another hat to our head. We want to give it away for the benefit of all beings. Even as a silent wish, you might think, 'I dedicate anything I have learned to others, so that they may be free from confusion in their lives and develop wisdom and clarity, and may suffering be transformed into peace.'"

Helen Tworkov
Cape Breton, Nova Scotia
August 2013

Part One

Entering the Path

1. First Steps

My father, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, was a great meditation master. When I was little I lived at his nunnery, Nagi Gompa, high above the city of Kathmandu, and even before I started my formal studies I often joined the nuns to listen to his teachings. Many times I heard my father use the Tibetan word *sangye* to explain enlightenment. *Sang* means "to wake up," to be free from ignorance and suffering. *Gye* means "to expand and flourish." Enlightenment has a sense of opening, my father explained, like a flower blossoming.

My father said many wonderful things about enlightenment that I did not understand, so I made up my own version: becoming a buddha meant never again feeling agitated, angry, or jealous. I was about seven years old at this time and thought of myself as lazy, and I was kind of sickly. I thought that waking up would leave these problems behind, and I would become robust, healthy, and free from fear and faults. Best of all, enlightenment would erase all memories of ever having had negative feelings.

With this happy conclusion, one day I asked my father, "When I get enlightened, will I be able to remember me? My old self?"

It was not unusual for my father to laugh affectionately at my questions, but he found this one particularly hilarious. Then he explained that enlightenment is not like being possessed by a spirit. Tibetan culture has a tradition of oracles, people who become possessed by spirits and make predictions and prophecies. When this happens, they forget their former selves and become different beings; they swirl and fall down like crazy drunks. To imitate their wild behavior my father waved his arms, raised one knee at a time, and danced in circles. Suddenly he

Mingyur Rinpoche with his father, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, and his older brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche, at Nagi Gompa in Kathmandu, Nepal, circa 1981.

stopped and said, "Not like that. Awakening is more like discovering yourself." He cupped his hands together and told me, "If you have a handful of diamonds but don't realize what they are, you treat them like pebbles. Once you recognize them as diamonds, you can use their precious qualities. Becoming a buddha is like discovering a diamond in your hand. You are discovering yourself, not getting rid of yourself."

The Eight Steps of the Foundation Practices

The foundation practices of Tibetan Buddhism are a sequence of eight steps that map out a path of self-discovery. They help us recognize the diamond that we've had all along, and this discovery is what we mean

by "waking up." These steps lead away from habits that cause confusion and unhappiness, and lead toward the clarity of our true nature.

In Tibetan, the foundation practices are called *ngondro*, which means, "that which comes first," and the traditional translation refers to "preliminary practices." Yet too often "preliminary" has been used to diminish the importance of ngondro. For this reason I prefer to say "foundation." Building a house requires a strong foundation. Without solid underpinnings our house will topple, and all the time, money, and energy that we spent will be wasted. This explains why the masters always emphasized that these first steps are more important than the subsequent practices.

Ngondro contains the essential principles that reemerge through all Buddhist teachings, such as those regarding no-self, impermanence, and suffering. It can transform concepts about compassion, karma, and emptiness from interesting theories into direct experience. It can change the way you think about yourself, how you understand your own capabilities, and how you relate to others. The possibilities introduced by ngondro are so vast and profound that if you try to comprehend the whole of it, it may seem overwhelming. For this reason, it's important to remember that ngondro works step by step.

Crossing Over from Confusion to Clarity

Have you ever been in a part of the world where people use animals to grind flour? Perhaps you have seen a donkey or a camel tethered to a grindstone. The animal walks around and around, turning the stone so that the wheat or corn beneath is crushed into flour. The animal wears blinders so it cannot become distracted from its task. In our normal lives, we too cover the same ground over and over again. We remain blind to our inherent treasures and keep walking in circles of ignorance. We reach outside of ourselves to gain happiness through relationships, money, or power, only to discover that we are deepening our rut without finding any relief from confusion. We call this endless cycle *samsara,* which means "spinning" or "going around in circles." We speak of being trapped in a cyclic existence. Without knowing anything about dharma,

without knowing about a path or about an exit from this endless cycle, we feel, as the texts say, "like bees trapped in a jar." This is not a nice feeling, yet a kind of resignation sets in.

The very first sign of waking up is the insight that we are not doomed to retrace our steps forever. Maybe we used to think: "This is my life, and I am stuck with these repetitive, neurotic habits and uncomfortable feelings, and nothing can be done about it." Then perhaps we recognize the limitations of this analysis and think: "Maybe there's a little crack in this bee jar of samsaric existence that I can slip through." This initiates the turn away from samsara, away from the mental state of confusion that manifests as desire and aversion. We turn away from chasing after every little comfort and from society's promise that lasting happiness comes in the form of romance, houses, reputation, or wealth. We turn away from looking outward. We begin to recognize that actually we already have everything we need to be happy.

It's very important to understand what creates samsara, also called the realm of confusion. Samsara does not arise from external circumstances. It's not tied to any particular object in the world around us. What creates samsara is how the mind habitually clings to its misperceptions of reality. In turning away from samsara, we begin to turn away from that state of entrapment that the mind places itself in. We wish to let go of the experience of dissatisfaction, and one good place to begin is renouncing the habit of blaming external circumstances for our feelings of anxiety, anguish, and dissatisfaction.

And what do we turn the mind toward? Toward itself. We work with our own mind as both the source of confusion and the source of clarity and contentment. We turn toward letting go of the misperceptions that keep us stuck in cycles of behavior that do not relieve our dissatisfaction. Letting go of these habits uncovers the freedom to make choices, meaning that we are no longer slaves to our neurosis and egocentricities, to our attractions and aversions. Knowing this freedom thoroughly, and allowing it to pervade our life, is called nirvana, liberation, awakening, or enlightenment. We also call this buddhahood. Uncovering this freedom is the path of dharma. Samsara is a state of mind. Nirvana is

a state of mind. Just as the sun shines whether obscured by clouds or not, clarity exists in the midst of confusion and suffering.

Imagine arriving at a village inn at night. No other cars, houses, or people seem to exist, but in the morning they miraculously appear. Of course they were there all along, but in the darkness we could not recognize their presence. This is exactly the same with our own liberated nature. Recognition is what transforms our reality from confusion to the clarity that leads to genuine ease. Recognition holds the key to our path, and our path starts with these foundation practices.

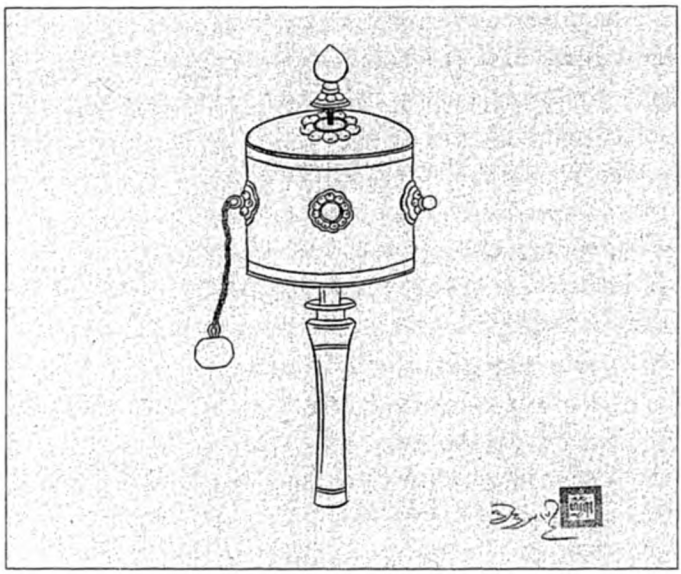
Let me add a word of caution: the path maps out this journey of discovery, yet this does not mean that our own internal awakening follows a neat, linear direction. The entire Buddhist path is based on understanding that our own mind offers the most reliable source of comfort, ease, and protection, yet the habits that bind us to confusion remain very strong, and letting go of them does not happen in a prescribed sequence. I know from experience that even receiving specific teachings on letting go of habitual patterns does not mean that this process happens all at once.

Letting Go

We often hear that the Buddha's teachings are about "letting go" of our attachments and fixations, but what does that really mean? It's easy to assume that it means, "I cannot have any wealth or fame, or a nice house or a good job. I must give up family, friends, even children." This is a misunderstanding. What we need to give up is our attachment.

When I started my own ngondro this was not at all clear to me. In my tradition, ngondro comes at the beginning of the traditional three-year retreat. During this time, all forms of distractions, including friends and family, are eliminated or minimized in order to intensify total immersion in dharma study.

When I was eleven, I began to live mostly at Sherab Ling Monastery in northern India, west of Dharamsala. I started my three-year retreat two years later, and soon confronted this apparent contradiction: on



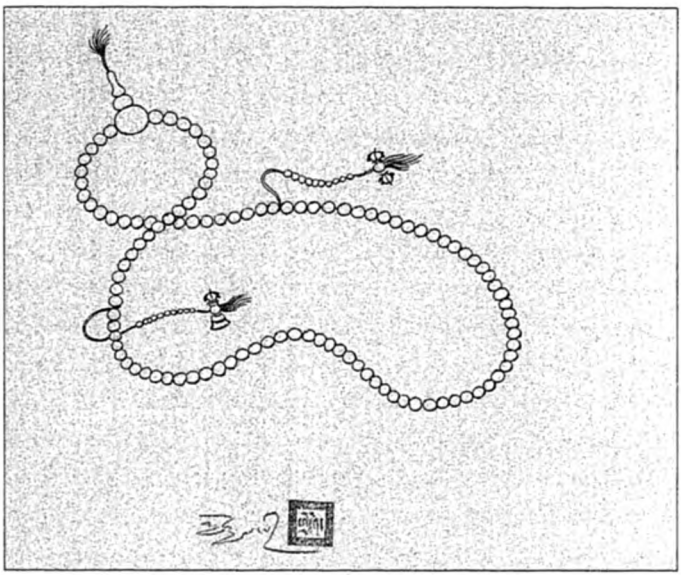
Prayer wheel.

the one hand, we seemed to be learning, "Wealth is OK, food is OK, fame is OK. It's all in the mind." On the other hand, it sounded as if we had to give up everything.

One afternoon I paid a visit to Saljay Rinpoche, my retreat master, whose room was off the main hall. As always, he had his *mala* [prayer beads] in one hand and his prayer wheel in the other. Handheld prayer wheels are filled with sacred syllables, the most popular being OM MANI PEME HUNG, the mantra of great compassion. The words are wound within a metal cylinder at the top of a wood handle and are circulated by a gentle hand motion. The purpose of the prayer wheel is to disseminate blessings.

I explained that his teachings made it sound like I had to give up my life as I knew it, both in Nepal and in India. "Do you mean total renunciation?" I asked. "Do I have to go into the forest or live in a cave?"

He answered with a teaching that a Buddhist master of ancient India named Tilopa [988–1069] gave to his disciple Naropa [1016–1100]: "Phenomena cannot bind you to samsara. Only your own grasping can bind you to samsara. The point is to let go of grasping."



Mala.

He watched for my response before continuing, which was—as became common—a silent request for him to keep talking. Then he said, "This does not mean to indulge in material comforts. That will never bring happiness. With letting go, you can live happily in a cave or a palace."

To demonstrate the difference between letting go and giving up, Saljay Rinpoche held his old *bodhi*-seed mala in his left hand with his palm facing down and his fingers closed around the mala. "The mala is experience," he said, "and the tighter you hold it, the more a few beads slip out from the sides of your clenched fingers.

"As you struggle to contain all the beads, your hand gets tighter and tighter, until you become so tired that you finally stop struggling and give up." He loosened his grip, and the mala dropped to his lap. But," he continued, "letting go is not the same as giving up. Here's another example." He held his hand flat with the palm facing up, allowing the mala to rest on top. "This is letting go," he explained. "Phenomena are OK. Wealth is OK. Money is OK. Perception is OK. The problem is grasping. This demonstrates letting go. You are not grasping the mala,

yet you still have it. The main difference between the hand facing down and the hand facing up is wisdom."

Letting go has wisdom. If we grasp too tightly, we become hopeless. The most important part of this training—this turning the mind from samsara to nirvana—is letting go of grasping. It may come as a big relief to learn that attachment and grasping are the main obstacles to our happiness, instead of our nice house or prestigious job. But letting go is not like taking the trash to the dump or giving a used coat to a homeless person. Detaching ourselves from the stuff of samsara might feel more like pulling our own flesh away from our bones.

Generally we cannot jump straight into the mind of nongrasping without giving up anything on an external level. For this reason, the path includes practices that encourage varying degrees of renunciation. Meditation itself expresses renunciation: however chaotic or grasping or consumed with desire our mind may be, we have still stepped away from the pressures of conventional activity to try to work with our mental confusion. That's a big step. Learning how to turn our mind away from the habits of confusion—as we do in ngondro—in order to access the true sources of liberation within us is another big step.

Both Saljay Rinpoche and my father used to say over and over: "We already have everything we need for our journey." Why did they keep repeating this? Because even though we understand the words, we don't really believe them. No one believes them 100 percent. That's OK, because we have to start someplace.

Uncovering what we already have may sound easy. Yet it's not. Attachment to samsara runs really deep, so deep that no external force can break it. The break must come from within. That begins with letting go of all the projections, constructions, and conventional ideas about ourselves, and learning how to recognize who we really are. To do that, meditation is our most effective tool.

Shamata

One meditation that we use throughout ngondro is called *shamata,* a Sanskrit word that means "calm abiding." In Tibetan, we call this

shinay. I will discuss the practice of shamata in the next chapter, yet to clarify this discussion I want to make a few points. "Calm abiding" describes a mind that abides in its own steadiness, a mind that is not always being pushed and pulled by circumstances. We access the mind of calm abiding through recognition. What do we recognize? Awareness: the ever-present knowing quality of mind, from which we are never separated for an instant. Even though normally we do not recognize awareness, we can no more live without it than we can live without breathing. For this reason, I often use the terms shamata and awareness meditation interchangeably.

Discovering our own awareness allows us to access the natural steadiness and clarity of the mind, which exist independent of conditions and circumstances, and independent of our emotions and moods. Awareness exists whether we are happy or sad, calm or anxious. It does not increase or decrease. We don't attain awareness; rather we learn to recognize it, and this recognition awakens the enlightened nature of mind.

Yet this recognition will never happen unless we believe in our capacity to allow it to happen. We need to let go of our sense of lack, of deficiency, of not being good enough to realize that we are already a buddha. Although we might not believe 100 percent that we have everything we need for our journey, we must develop some faith in our capacities. To accomplish that, the first step of ngondro deliberately works to convince us that buddhahood is in the palm of our hands.

The Four Common and the Four Unique Practices

Traditional ngondro liturgies range from short and simple to long and complicated, and among the many commentaries on ngondro that exist, some contain precise instructions about rituals, offerings, visualizations, and so forth. Yet Western students are not always inspired by the traditional explanations, or they cannot navigate through the cultural trappings of old Tibet in order to understand the essential teachings, which are timeless and universal. So even though a fair amount of

"how-to" material is provided here, the emphasis is more on meaning. Also I want to briefly introduce all eight ngondro practices now, so that we can hold a sense of the entire process as we delve into detailed descriptions later. With an overview of the entire forest, we are less likely to get lost in the trees.

The eight steps of ngondro are divided into the four thoughts that turn the mind, also called the "four common practices," and the "four unique practices." The distinction between "common" and "unique" is based on the methods and techniques used in carrying out the practices. The common practices are shared by all schools of Buddhism. Many views of the unique practices are also "common" to all Buddhist schools—particularly taking refuge. But the methods that we use are unique to Tibetan Buddhism.

The First Thought That Turns the Mind: Precious Human Existence

This first step is a contemplation that emphasizes that we humans are born with everything we need in order to cross over from confusion to clarity. This first thought arouses an enthusiastic appreciation for those attributes and circumstances that we tend to take for granted—our eyes, ears, limbs, and organs; our capacity for cognizance, speech, and learning. We examine our physical body and mental attributes in order to establish the unwavering conviction that at this very moment, we are fully endowed with the rare and precious potential for awakening. Knowing this cuts through our ordinary—and also very human—inclinations toward seeing ourselves in terms of what we lack. We turn away from feelings of inadequacy that dampen our aspirations and inhibit our capabilities.

The Second Thought That Turns the Mind: Impermanence

The opportunities provided by our precious human birth are not only rare, but do not last and may not come around again for a long time.

Although growing old and dying is inevitable, people still arrive at old age feeling betrayed by their bodies. The most ordinary aspects of life can be met with extraordinary resistance, and this resistance itself causes suffering. Once we stop denying the certainty of death, then we can take full advantage of the time that we have in this precious human form. This is the essential point of the second thought.

Whatever phenomena we examine—our body, buildings, airplanes, computers—affirm the certainty of impermanence. Our body presents a particularly difficult challenge because we want so much not to die. Our logical, rational mind tells us that we will die, even as we act like we'll live forever. This same delusion about permanence generally includes how we relate to our jobs, our economic situations, our loved ones, and so forth. Yet because these situations depend on external causes and conditions, they cannot remain constant. When we fail to recognize their impermanent nature, we grasp hopelessly to what we cannot have.

This mismatch between things as they are and things as we want them to be causes an enormous amount of confusion and dissatisfaction every day. Say we arrive at the airport and our flight has been delayed. The collective agitation among delayed passengers tends to be contagious. Not getting caught in this agitation requires us to accommodate change. But we get stuck on how things should be, and we act as if an intrinsic connection exists between a flight being delayed and a state of exasperation. We act like hooked fish: once our expectations have been foiled, then getting reeled into disappointment, exasperation, maybe even rage, feels inevitable.

We feel helpless, but we are not. We may not be able to do anything about a delayed flight. But we can definitely eliminate exasperation. Through meditation, we can connect to awareness. Once we are connected to awareness, we are no longer identified with the reaction. This affects normal behavior and allows us to change the way we relate to circumstances, even when circumstances themselves change.

Even a little everyday-type problem such as a delay—which happens at the airport, in traffic, in line at the cash machine—can throw our mind into a tailspin. For many modern people, this state of mind defines daily life—always stressed out, always blaming and reacting to

outside circumstances. And this kind of attachment accounts for people arriving at their own death still unaccepting of the change right before them. Daily life provides countless occasions for adapting to change and impermanence. Yet we squander these precious opportunities, assuming that we have all the time in the world.

Actually, once we stabilize our own recognition of awareness, we at least stand a chance of changing circumstances outside of ourselves. If we approach an airline agent with anger and moral indignation, then of course, like any sentient being under attack, he or she will withdraw into defensive self-protection. That is their wisdom. However, with practice we become more selective in our behavior. We can see the conventional inclinations and emotional patterns that lead from one step to the other. We can see how actions and reactions condition our mind for the next moment. With the tool of recognition, we have a choice. The outcome of any situation is not predetermined. Accepting our own impermanence encourages us to let go of conventional reactions and to cultivate behavior that can reduce suffering in the future. This introduces cause and effect, which is the next step.

The Third Thought That Turns the Mind: Karma

Karma deals with the law of cause and effect. The traditional teaching to young monks uses planting a seed to explain this: we plant a seed, and a grain grows. We turn on the engine, and the car starts. This is the way the world works. Karma introduces an ethical component: what we do in this moment conditions the next moment for others and ourselves in either a positive, negative, or neutral way. Much of everyday activity is neutral, but—for example, when our flight is delayed—we have the possibility of going in either a positive or negative direction. The present is conditioned by our past, and our future will be conditioned by the present. This isn't always obvious, because although our behavior right now will definitely affect the future, that future might mean the next minute, the next year, or the next lifetime.

Many people do not believe in reincarnation and resist the idea of karma because it's associated with past and future lives. Yet understanding karma is as relevant to this life as to what may or may not happen

Mingyur Rinpoche in Nubri, Nepal, circa 1983.

after we die. For this reason, it's not necessary to believe in reincarnation in order to benefit from understanding karma. Karma helps explain how the current state of our mind can be influenced by an event from the far or recent past, and how our behavior today will affect our future.

It is very important to know that karma is not destiny. Past karmic influences that contribute to our present circumstances do not determine the future. Our behavior determines our future; in other words, our future is determined by whether we engage in behavior that intends to harm or help ourselves and others. We create our own karma, so the more we take responsibility for our actions, the more we increase our capacity to create the life we want to live.

Our life is not preordained. We can change and control the direction of our life regardless of our past or present circumstances. But recognizing that we will die energizes our aspiration to create good karma. Everything is impermanent, and death comes without warning. Understanding karma makes our life meaningful right now. Each moment provides an opportunity to turn toward awakening; and we are more likely to take advantage of each moment once we accept that these moments are limited. If we believe in reincarnation, then the aspiration to create good karma becomes magnified because we want to create the very best conditions for our rebirth, and right now offers the

best opportunity. Behavior that leads away from unhappiness and from harming ourselves and others will help alleviate difficult circumstances in our future lives.

Once we understand the role we play in the suffering that we experience—which is the subject of the fourth thought—then we are further motivated to pay attention to the law of karma and interdependence. We are even more energized to diminish suffering right now, rather than to carry it into the future.

The Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind: Suffering

With the first three contemplations—precious human existence, impermanence, and karma—we begin to accept how fruitless our strategies for happiness have been. Of course most adults have already experienced the disappointments of samsara, but without alternatives we might just hope for the best, all the time walking in circles like the camel tethered to the grindstone. Yet before we can truly turn away from the world of confusion, we must confront the full measure of suffering and dissatisfaction that defines samsara. Only then are we prepared to wholeheartedly devote ourselves to the views and values that liberate us from suffering.

Shakyamuni Buddha's first teaching was on *dukkha,* a Sanskrit word commonly translated as "suffering." We often associate suffering with disasters such as earthquakes, wars, or terminal diseases, whereas a lot of Buddhist training applies to maintaining a steady mind when our flight is canceled or when we cannot locate the remote control for the TV. These daily irritations may sound trivial, but actually they're the stuff of our life, and they can create a continuous state of agitation. Dukkha describes a mind that is never completely at ease, that always wants things to be different than they are, a mind endlessly spinning.

Sometimes dukkha is interpreted as dissatisfaction, the feeling that, no matter how good the circumstances, they could always be better. "It's a perfect day, but a bit warm." Or "My life is going very well, if only—if only I had more money, if only I could get that promotion, if only I could buy that house." This mind continuously reaches out to change outside circumstances or pulls back to avoid them. Reaching

Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha (circa 566–485 B.C.E).

out toward that new car or favorite food, reaching for a partner or prestige. Grasping. Craving. A mind never content with the present, always restless, always buzzing around looking for a place to alight, which it sometimes does—but only for a few seconds. The consistent theme of dukkha is wanting things to be different from the way they are. Because many levels of mental agitation exist, it's hard to fit all types into one word. But dissatisfaction can grow into real anguish and create a life of misery.

The Buddha understood that samsara is maintained by grasping and by ignorance. Seeing that this results in suffering initiates the turn toward liberation. We start by accepting—or at least acknowledging—our situation. We gain familiarity with the patterns that keep us spinning, and seeing them allows us to separate from their grip. Recognition itself cracks the bee jar of samsara.

One morning at Nagi Gompa, I joined the nuns and listened as my father explained the truth of suffering. I was still a boy, and just could

not understand why anyone would stick around for these teachings. When the talk ended, the nuns left and I stayed behind, sort of pouting in the corner. My father called to me, "Ahme." This is a Tibetan term of endearment, like "dear one" or "sweetie." "Ahme, why are you looking so sad?"

"From the beginning," I told him, "you are giving me bad news."

He then told me about visiting a dharma center in Southeast Asia. He had been invited to teach for a weekend, and the students had rented a large auditorium. The first day the place was packed, but the second day it was half empty. Toward the end of the program, some students said, "We have heard enough about suffering; can you give us some good news?" And my father told them, "The bad news *is* the good news."

My father explained to me that most beings do not have the capacity to recognize their own unhappiness, but humans do. "This is the blessing of our birth," he said. "It's what makes us different from other beings, but the real advantage is using this recognition as the path to freedom. If we never acknowledge suffering, we remain stuck in samsara."

Recognition of dukkha helps liberate us from dukkha. When we face suffering honestly, the energetic power that dukkha has over our life eases up, and the bad news of suffering transforms into the good news of liberation. The more we let go of our attachments and projections, the more dukkha dissolves. The more dukkha dissolves, the more our true nature emerges—our fundamental nature of being, which is not more present or absent, or bigger or smaller, depending on our moods and emotions. It is not like the stock market that goes up or down depending on circumstances. Our angry flare-ups and our "wow" moments, our depressions and enthusiasms, are all just like waves that arise from the ever-present calm clarity of our mind and that disappear into the same calm clarity. And arise and disappear, again and again.

Happiness

Westerners speak of the "pursuit" of happiness, which generally depends on running after external conditions: the overthrow of an oppressive

regime, the restructuring of a financial system, or a change of partners or houses. With society's encouragement, we stake our happiness on the pursuit of reputation, power, and wealth. We put a lot of effort into satisfying our desires. We shop for fashionable clothes or furniture, climb the corporate ladder, and negotiate for bigger paychecks. This version of happiness depends on "success," which is conventionally measured by the degree to which we have fulfilled our pursuits or have satisfied our desires. There is only one problem: the very nature of desire is that it cannot be satisfied—at least not for long.

The happiness that I'm talking about is not "pursued." In fact, the more we remain self-contained and do not pursue thoughts or fantasies, or rush from one attractive object to another, the more we can access a wakeful contentment that is always with us. We are so familiar with the tumultuous reactivity of our mind that mental chaos feels quite normal. Being able to let go of grasping requires practice.

This wakeful state of ease is quite joyful and approaches a profound sense of well-being. We've all had moments when we relax, allow our shoulders to sink, and drop the anxious chatter in our mind. We release a big sigh and think, "Wow, everything is really OK: me, my situation, the world." There's an acceptance of things just as they are. We stop reaching for what we want. We stop trying to control our comfort zone. This letting go leaves us feeling peaceful and optimistic. We have not strategized to attain this state, like adding a hat to our head. It's more like the absence of trying to manipulate or influence our circumstances. However, these moments of utter contentment tend to be fleeting. Within seconds, the thoughts, cravings, and fantasies return. Yet with discipline and perseverance, this uncontrived ease extends past a momentary experience.

Transmission

Before we leave behind the four thoughts that turn the mind, and continue with the four steps of the unique ngondro, I want to say a few words about the traditional transmission of certain Tibetan Buddhist practices. It is perfectly appropriate to become familiar with the four

unique practices—as well as other practices—through reading. Texts and commentaries provide wonderful support for our efforts toward awakening. Yet for the next part of ngondro, we must receive transmission from a living guide in order to actually do the practices.

With varying degrees of formality, transmission in Tibetan Buddhism involves rituals and teachings that "empower" the student to undertake a particular practice, thus affirming and enhancing the student's capability. The idea of transmission might sound quite foreign, but the way that it works in Tibetan Buddhism shares similarities to things that most people already know about. For example, we have all received some degree of education. In order for that to happen, we had to find an institution that offered the subjects that interested us. Perhaps we had to take entrance exams to qualify. There may be times when knowledge is transmitted very informally, and others times when rituals and rites of passage, such as graduation ceremonies, empower one to enter higher levels of learning. The structure and formality of the education process allows us to explore our passions and interests.

When it comes to transmission in a spiritual sense, we do not sign up to learn a subject, but rather to transform our relationship with our mind. So the qualities of presence that the teacher communicates take on more importance than having proper credentials or having special gifts for imparting information. By connecting with a spiritual teacher and a lineage, the possibility of awakening moves from an abstract idea to something that we can see and feel.

How does this work exactly? The teacher—whom we also call the "guide" or the "guru"—holds the energy of the practice. Transmission can be a ceremony—sometimes lasting only a few minutes—that activates our capacity through the reading of texts and teachings. This works like a chain of extension cords: we receive electric power by plugging into the source that is already connected. The transmission activates our capability, bringing the process alive. We can buy a SIM card for our mobile phone, but in order to use it, we must activate it. This is the technical role of transmission.

Yet beneath the ritual, the contact with a living teacher and members

of a practice community might be our initial firsthand introduction to the possibilities of awakening. We have a chance to see that we possess the same potential for enlightenment as the teacher, who also represents the dharma and the lineage. Transmission isn't merely a ritual that confers permission for certain practices. It bestows self-assurance and optimism: "I too can do this."

Without the appropriate transmission, the practice loses power and becomes like a dead language. There's lots of inspiring material to study, but without the juice that can only be freshly squeezed from teachings received from a living person, the practice dries up. It would be like learning to play the piano by reading a book, rather than by taking lessons with a gifted teacher. Without the confidence of empowerment, our aspirations may easily succumb to discouragement, dullness, or boredom.

Please respect this distinction between reading and practicing. If you are inspired to do the practices, you will need to find an appropriate and authentic guide. In old Tibet, people walked for days to receive transmissions for practices that they wished to do. Today, even if you do not live near a dharma center, you can use the Internet to locate an appropriate guide who may be traveling in your area or is based close enough for you to visit, or you might investigate possibilities by joining online discussion groups. Then when you have questions or need to figure out a workable practice schedule, you have someone to go to. This is very important.

The Four Practices of the Unique Ngondro

So far the teachings on precious existence, impermanence, karma, and suffering have provided ways to step back and reflect on the more obvious habitual patterns that keep us spinning in samsara. In the next set of practices, we step forward into ourselves. We continue to examine our personal behavior, but add to this ways of discovering more subtle and stable aspects of ourselves; and this initiates the process of recognizing our own buddhahood.

The First Unique Practice: Taking Refuge

We enter the second part of ngondro by taking refuge in the Buddha, the supreme guide; the Dharma, the Buddhist teachings; and the Noble Sangha, the community of enlightened beings. Our motivation is to bring forth and nurture all the goodness, wisdom, and compassion that we already have. The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha become tools for uncovering those aspects of our being that, like the diamond, have been obscured. We are cultivating the capacity to take refuge in the best and truest aspects of ourselves—in our own buddha nature—but we still don't quite understand what that means.

Let's begin by examining those refuges that we typically rely on. Generally we seek protection by merging with someone or something. We take refuge in our relationships, our homes, our health, and our wealth. Yet if we lose our home or our relationship ends, or our money or health diminishes, the security that we have invested in these conditions also diminishes. If we take refuge in political or military power, and the regime we support collapses, we might lose our position and prestige. Through examination, we see that samsaric refuges are pretty unreliable and that our mind is as unstable as our sources of refuge. Up and down, up and down.

With our new change in direction, we turn toward refuges that support our quest for freedom. We still draw on the instinct for protection. But now we choose refuges that help nurture the positive qualities that already exist within us and that bring lasting happiness. We do not get rid of our need for refuge; we transform it. We start with what we have and build from there.

Buddhists of all different lineages and cultural backgrounds take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In my tradition, taking refuge includes *bodhichitta,* the mind that aspires to enlightenment for the benefit of helping all beings recognize and fully manifest their own buddhahood. The main point about bodhichitta is that from now on, all of our practices—and eventually all of our daily life activities—are motivated by the aspiration to help others recognize their enlightened

nature, to become buddhas and to know abiding freedom. People may benefit from our love, or from the food, comfort, clothing, or money that we offer, but when we apply bodhichitta to our efforts, we make the ultimate aspiration for the ultimate benefit. So our wish may be: "I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha so that I may become enlightened in order to help all beings become enlightened." The bodhichitta aspiration eliminates the separation between self and other, distinguishing our refuge practice from many other Buddhist schools.

The Second Practice of the Unique Ngondro: Purification

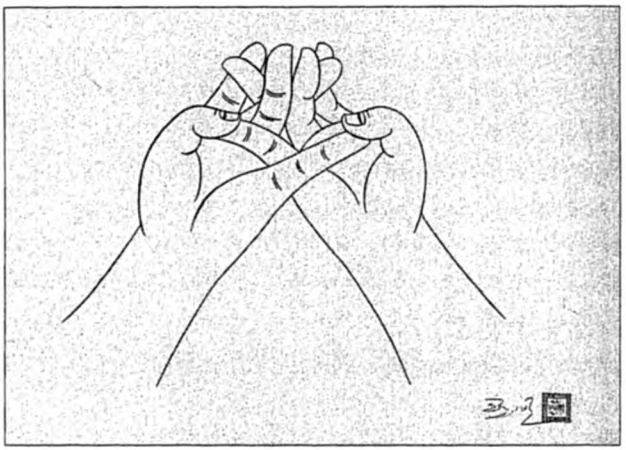
In ways similar to refuge, this practice builds on a need basic to the human condition. We have all committed acts that have caused some degree of suffering to ourselves and others. Once we understand the law of cause and effect, we recognize that we cannot cause harm to others without hurting ourselves. The violation could be the intentional murder of a human being or the inevitable killing of insects as we drive down the highway; it may involve lying or deception. We have all committed acts that have left us with a need for forgiveness—or for purification.

We might ask, If our true nature is pristine and pure, what are we purifying? Ultimately we are washing the mud off the diamond. We purify our mind until we realize that we are already pure. Without this realization, we tend to relate to our day-to-day experience as an endless series of problems that we need to fix. Purification practice helps to dismantle the habit of seeing ourselves as impure.

The Third Practice of the Unique Ngondro: Mandala Offering

It's common to see old Tibetans with their hands joined in the mandala mudra.

Sometimes they have rice or flowers in their palms. They recite a short prayer, then open their hands and throw the rice or flowers in the air. If



Mandala hand mudra.

they hold nothing in their hands, they just make a gesture of letting go and giving everything away.

I grew up seeing people do this, but it never caught my attention until I was watching my grandmother one day. When I asked her what she was doing, she explained that she was offering the whole world and everything in it—including herself—to the buddhas. I kept quiet because my many questions could annoy my grandmother.

Later at Sherab Ling, Saljay Rinpoche taught me that mandala practice cultivates the mind of letting go. He explained this just as my grandmother had, saying, "We give away the whole world and everything in it. This is how we cultivate the mind of letting go." Then he started elaborating what we let go of: "Planets, galaxies, oceans, clouds . . ."

"But we don't own those things," I said, interrupting to correct my master.

"We are working with our mind," Saljay Rinpoche told me. "Imagination makes anything possible. Anything. But we also give away things that have a more conventional sense of ownership, such as houses or prayer wheels, our money, tables, or books. We give away our body."

"What is it," I asked, "that we are really, really giving away?"

"We are giving away the mind that grasps," Saljay Rinpoche said. "We let go of the mind that creates suffering. This is the ego-mind."

The ego-mind of grasping and fixation is the fundamental obstacle to our path of liberation. To dissolve this barrier, we experiment with a kind of boundless generosity that we access through imagination. We use our imagination to nurture the mind of generosity, and this accumulates merit. At the same time, our imagination takes us far beyond relative, ordinary, conceptual reality, and as a result we glimpse the true empty clarity of our mind from which all forms arise, and this insight accumulates wisdom. Ultimately we realize that our own true nature is the supreme source of richness, inexhaustible and with diamond-like indestructibility.

The Fourth Practice of the Unique Ngondro: Guru Yoga

At this stage of ngondro, it's as if we have arrived at the bank of a wide river and aspire to cross to the other shore. Perhaps we are not completely free from our ego-cherishing habits. Yet we have recognized them and have developed some confidence that our life no longer has to be controlled by confusion. Perhaps we've glimpsed the original clarity of our mind. Or maybe the value of our journey so far inspires us to go further. But actually we cannot cross from samsara to nirvana on our own. We need a living teacher or guru.

In this final step of our ngondro practice, we encounter the immeasurable benefits of having a guru; we come to understand the ultimate inseparability between our essential nature and that of the guru, and this bestows confidence and encourages our quest. In guru yoga we unite our mind with the mind of the guru, and in this way we receive the blessings of the entire lineage—a vast, boundless universe of beings ready to support our efforts.

Whether the shore on the other side of the river strikes us as being very close or far away, we all need help getting across. The guru helps shift our perception from confusion to clarity. He or she is the bridge that allows us to cross from samsara to nirvana. Also, guru yoga practice is the bridge between ngondro and subsequent practices. From this point on, we work continuously to transform patterns that have kept us spinning in samsara, and to allow the

glimpses of freedom uncovered by these first steps to reorient our view and behavior.

The Importance of First Steps

Nowadays many people rush through ngondro eager for "advanced" practices. No practices are more important than these. Do you know what many of the great masters of Tibet did once they completed their ngondro? They started ngondro again from the very beginning. I know highly realized lamas who completed ngondro sixteen times. Many great lamas practiced ngondro at the end of their lives. Ngondro was the first step and the last.

As we progress in ngondro, the practices as well as the views demand more of us, yet each step prepares us for the next, so it's quite workable. Please take these words to heart. Don't rush. Don't imagine "more important" practices than these. One step at a time really can turn our mind from confusion to clarity.

2. Meditation

THE ESSENTIAL TOOL

Before going further, I want to discuss meditation. This is because meditation provides the essential tool for all our practices, including the ngondro practices, and because nowadays meditation means different things to different people. In order to establish a common understanding, I want to recount one of my own earliest introductions to meditation.

My father compared the effects of meditation to the behavior of a good shepherd. From the big window in his small room at Nagi Gompa, we could see a vast expanse of sky and the sprawling city of Kathmandu below. Sometimes we sat together and watched boys graze their flocks. "Good shepherds sit on the hill watching over their flock, alert and aware," my father explained. "If an animal strays, they scramble down to provide guidance. They do not race around pushing their flock this way and that way, so that the poor animals cannot get enough to eat and become exhausted, and the shepherd too becomes exhausted."

"Do good shepherds meditate?" I asked.

"They are not working with their minds in a direct way," he said. "So they are not meditating, but they are relaxed and undistracted. They look outward to their flock while maintaining an inner steadiness. They are not chasing after the sheep. When we meditate, we do not chase after thoughts. A bad shepherd has a narrow view. He might chase after one sheep that strays to the left but miss the one moving to the right, so he ends up running in circles like a dog chasing its tail. When we

meditate, we don't try to control all our thoughts and feelings. We just rest naturally, like the good shepherd, watchful and attentive."

One time my father pointed to a boy sitting in the sun with his back against a flat rock watching his flock below. The boy untied the cloth that held his lunch and ate slowly, raising his eyes to check on his goats. When he finished eating he took out a wooden flute, and my father opened the window to listen. Everyone seemed so happy: the boy, my father, and the goats. "Does that boy meditate?" I asked my father. He shook his head. "But still he's so happy?" I asked.

"The good shepherd is free to make choices in his behavior," my father explained. "He has a calm mind, which keeps his flock calm. Since he does not make the animals nervous, they don't run away. This gives him time to sit down, eat lunch, and play his flute.

"But don't confuse relaxed behavior with mind. Today the sun is shining. It's not too cold, not too windy. The circumstances for this shepherd could not be better. What happens if they change? What happens to the mind if the owner sells those goats? To know true freedom of mind, we must meditate in order to recognize the nature of mind itself. Then we will not be carried away by thoughts, emotions, and circumstances. Stormy weather or sunshine, the mind stays steady."

To cultivate a steady mind independent of circumstances, we must work with the mind itself. Working directly with the mind uncovers the inherent quality of meditative awareness. Each ngondro practice differs in content and approach. But in each case, we work with the mind in a deliberate way.

Awareness

Awareness is the natural, innate, knowing quality of mind that is with us all the time. We cannot function without awareness; we would have no experience of anything without awareness. However, we do not always recognize it. In fact, most of the time we don't. Meditation teaches us to recognize the awareness that we already have.

There are three types of awareness: normal awareness, which we experience before we learn to meditate; meditative awareness, which

comes with the recognition of awareness itself; and pure awareness, which occurs when our recognition deepens and we directly experience the nature of awareness.

Normal Awareness

The most pervasive quality of normal awareness is that awareness itself goes unrecognized. We remain so preoccupied and identified with every idea and image in our mind that we don't recognize awareness itself. Awareness is always present. We cannot function without it, but we can function without recognizing it.

There are two forms of normal awareness: One is attentive and present—characteristics associated with meditation and displayed by the good shepherd. The other form is characterized by distraction, with no resemblance to meditative behavior. Yet neither type recognizes awareness itself.

Let's say we look at a flower. With distracted normal awareness, our eyes turn toward the flower while we might be thinking about pizza, partners, or movies. Or we drive to a restaurant with friends, and on leaving the restaurant disagreement arises about the return route. We do not forget the route because awareness disappears—we can no more be without awareness than we can be without breath—but our awareness was covered by distractions, by the mind talking to itself, by fantasies and daydreams. We remained aware enough to get to the restaurant, but not enough to know how we did it. Awareness may become muddied, obscured—but not gone. In this distracted state, we are like the bad shepherd. We eat breakfast while chasing after thoughts about dinner. At dinner we cannot remember what we ate for breakfast.

When we pay attention to washing dishes, driving a car, or solving math problems, we stay focused on the task. When we say that a person does a job well, this generally reflects a capacity for paying attention. For a shoemaker, the field of attention may be the details of stitching, gluing, and the pliability of the leather. Doctors must pay attention to their patients' physical and emotional signs. To excel at any job, nondistracted normal awareness must predominate. In each case, the attention—and therefore the mind itself—is on the object of

awareness: sheep, shoes, patients, or the road. The mind is not lost in distracted chatter; it's aware of its subject, but awareness itself goes unrecognized.

Mental attributes such as attention and concentration can be beneficial tools for our dharma studies too, for memorization of texts and so forth. But concentration and focus do not uncover the natural, original state of our mind, which is where we find true freedom. For that, we need to recognize awareness.

Meditative Awareness

Meditation requires some degree of being aware of awareness itself. We become cognizant of the quality of the mind, not just of phenomena perceived by the mind. When we begin to meditate, supports such as images of buddhas, our breath, or a flower can be helpful. We rest our attention on the support. But just paying attention is not yet meditation. The two critical ingredients for meditation are intention and recognition. We start by purposely resting on the support—that's where intention comes in. We also stay aware of what's happening as it happens—that's recognition. In other words, when we rest our attention on the breath, we don't get completely absorbed in the experience to the point that we lose touch with everything else. We are fully conscious of the breath, but we also know that we are aware.

Let's say that we use a flower as support for awareness. We bring attention to the object and use it to support the recognition of awareness. This is what we mean by support. The object of meditation supports the cultivation of recognition. Shakyamuni Buddha said: "A monk, when walking, knows that he is walking; when standing, knows that he is standing; when sitting, knows that he is sitting; when lying down, knows that he is lying down." This knowingness, this recognition of each moment and each activity, is meditation.

Once we recognize awareness, we can continue using the support if it's helpful, but not in a focused, narrow way. Using a support for our meditation, such as the breath or a visual form, becomes a means to a more spacious, relaxed state of mind that remains steady in the midst of the mind's activity. If you start off using a flower for support, don't

worry about whether or not you have awareness. If you intend for the flower to support your recognition of awareness, that will happen. The intention and motivation itself will bring about the recognition.

Within the ngondro practices, the supports vary from animals—such as cows or dogs—to god-realm beings, deities, and gurus . . . to entire universes. The sound of a mantra may be a support. But the process is the same as working with a flower or with your own breath. The support functions as a way to uncover and recognize qualities of mind.

Pure Awareness

As meditative awareness deepens, we may begin to experience what we call pure awareness. This isn't some extraordinary state of consciousness. In fact, one of its main characteristics is that it's completely ordinary. It's simply the natural extension of the first glimpse of awareness that comes when we start to meditate. However, the meditation process itself connects us not only with the presence of awareness, but with the very nature of awareness. Once we recognize this pure awareness, the entire path of awakening—including all the ngondro practices—helps nurture and stabilize this recognition, and integrates it with every aspect of our life.

Learning How to Meditate

Since awareness is always present, it may seem that we should never fail to recognize it. Yet even after we set the intention and the motivation, our efforts might slide right off the tracks and leave us frustrated: "It sounds so simple, why can't I do it?" Because for all our intellectual understanding, we don't really get just how simple it is, and we continue to stick with misguided views. These views all share one misunderstanding: the belief that there is something wrong with the present moment. Maybe our meditation space isn't quiet enough, maybe it's too hot or too cold; maybe we have too many thoughts or too many emotions, or we think that we don't have the right thoughts and feelings. Whatever comes up, we identify a problem with the present moment.

As we begin to experiment with uncovering aspects of the mind that

we have not encountered before, once we set our intention, whatever happens is OK. We simply notice what arises and let it go. We do not fixate on it, or hold it in place, or judge it. We just watch the parade of thoughts and emotions as if we were standing on a viewing platform.

Rather than trying to construct an idealized mental or physical environment for meditation, the very best support takes advantage of our own body. The Buddha said that our body is like a cup, our mind like water. When the cup is still, the water is still. When the cup moves, the water moves. Quieting the body supports our efforts to work with the mind, making posture the first important step in learning how to meditate.

Having a particular area for meditation can be helpful, but don't think, "Oh, I don't have a meditation room with a perfect shrine and a picture window overlooking a waterfall." Attachment to the perfect meditation place is just a distraction or an excuse. We work with whatever situation we're in. If we have a clean, quiet place, great—wonderful. If we live in a dirty, chaotic city, no problem. People practice meditation in jails, army barracks, homeless shelters, and hospitals. The essential point is to work with our mind. Anything else—favorable or unfavorable conditions—can be used in service to our practice.

The biggest support for working with our mind is not an external location, but our own body. We already know the connection between body and mind: when the body loses energy through sickness, our mind loses energy, too. If we have a cold or a headache, we might say, "I cannot think straight." If the mind is troubled by rejection, the body too feels dejected, as if beaten down by life. With a happy experience such as a romance or a promotion, the body blossoms with confidence. Yet generally people might not be sensitive to how much the body can support the mind in meditation.

The Seven-Point Posture

To develop a posture that supports our practice, we rely on a classic set of guidelines called the seven-point posture. This posture symbolizes the qualities of enlightened form. These guidelines stabilize the body,

create a foundational support for the mind, and bring into alignment the energy channels that help the mind stay alert, open, and relaxed.

Because each person's body is different, each posture needs some experimentation. Don't try to sit for long periods in the beginning. It's more beneficial to hold a strong position for a short time—five or ten minutes, which can be increased slowly—than to spend forty minutes fidgeting or feeling distracted by discomfort or pain.

Legs

Sit on the floor with your legs crossed. Most people sit on a cushion to raise their bottoms a few inches higher than their knees. This creates a three-point base of support, which provides a sense of rootedness in the ground and lends strength to the upper body. If physical obstacles make it too difficult to sit on the floor, then a chair is fine, but keep your back straight and your knees at the same level as your hips. To create a level line, you can place a pillow on the chair to lift your body, or place a pillow under your feet. The feet should feel firmly planted on the ground. You want a posture that creates a sense of strength and courage, not in an aggressive way, but not passive either.

When you sit on the floor, there are several different styles for crossing your legs. The *vajra* posture (also known as the full-lotus posture) offers the most stable base: the left foot rests on the right thigh and is closest to the body. The right foot rests on the left thigh. Not many Tibetan people use this position. Most meditators use the half-lotus posture, with one foot resting on the opposite thigh. Or both legs are on the floor, one folded close to the body, and the other outside of it.

All these leg postures support the back and help counter restlessness in the body and the mind. For people who did not grow up sitting on the floor or sitting cross-legged, these postures can be difficult or even painful. With time, this can change. Stretching exercises can help, and practice itself will increase the capacity for these postures. But meditation is not a competitive sport. Sitting in the full-lotus posture should not become like the finish line at the end of a hundred-meter sprint. Intention is more important than posture, intention, and sincerity. So experiment with genuine intention, and do the best you can.

Hands

The hands rest on the lap, or are held between the lap and the navel. The lower hand rests palm up, and the other rests on top of that, also palm up. It doesn't matter if the right hand or the left is on the bottom. In the formal position, the thumbs just slightly touch, forming a kind of oval-shaped mudra. The hands can also be placed palms down on the knees. For someone with long legs and short arms, this may create tension in the forearms or shoulders. In this case, slide the hands back until they can rest on the thighs without tension.

Upper Arms

Leave a little space between the upper arms and the sides of the torso. To get the feel of this, imagine cradling an egg a few inches below your armpit. This helps keep the chest open and expansive. Traditionally this posture is called "holding arms like the wings of a vulture." But don't raise your shoulders and bring the elbows out as if you're about to flap your wings. This will create unbearable tension. Most importantly you want to give the chest maximum breathing room and not restrict it in any way, so don't squeeze in with your arms.

Back

Keeping the back straight is most important. If your back is slumped, your chest will cave in and contribute to a slumped mental state with a mind that is not fully alive to its own capacities. Also this mind is most vulnerable to sleep. If the back is hunched over, then the channels in the body become blocked, creating restlessness and discomfort. A back that is too rigid tends to be held in place with a tense body and a tense mind. This is exhausting. A person may sit in what looks like upright perfection for a while, but then suddenly fall over asleep, worn out from the effort of holding the posture too stiffly. Tibetans say, "Do not sit as if you swallowed a yardstick."

Remember that each body and each spine is different. Tibetans compare the straight spine in the meditation posture to a pile of coins stacked in a straight line, or to vertebrae that are as straight as an arrow. But all spines have natural curves that must be taken into account. So

"straight" is not an objective description of how your spine should be. Straight means your own position for perfect balance.

Neck and Head

When you allow the spine its natural forward bend at the neck, then the head will find its own resting place on the neck—not too far back or too far forward. Usually this is just a slight inclination, a tip of the chin toward the throat, which lengthens the neck. For people new to meditation—and even for longtime practitioners—the mind in meditation often vacillates between agitation and dullness. If the head falls too far forward, the result is dullness and sleepiness. If the chin is slightly raised or is jutting out, this generally indicates too much discursive thinking or mental agitation. Finding the right physical balance in the body will help counter these two tendencies in the mind.

To assess the correct alignment, hold an orange in one hand at about the height of your mouth, palm down; place the other hand, palm up, below the navel. Then just open the upper hand and release the orange. If the alignment is correct, the orange will land in the palm of the lower hand.

Mouth

When you relax the muscles around the mouth and the jaw, both the upper and lower teeth and the lips tend to part slightly. This is the resting position of the mouth. Then allow the tip of the tongue to rest at the top of the palate, where the palate and upper teeth meet. You can breathe through the mouth, through the nose, or through both.

Eyes

Some meditation traditions suggest closing the eyes. Those new to meditation often find this the easiest way to eliminate distractions, but some problems may arise from this. As you journey forth, you want to work with your mind in all circumstances and situations. Having the perfect cushion, the nice shrine, and even these suggestions for how to sit, how to hold the spine and the hands—all are time-tested supports for learning how to work with your mind. You cannot afford to discard these

traditional aids. But your goal is not to maintain a perfected meditation posture like a stone buddha. If you only practice in situations that are removed from daily life, or if you remove yourself through techniques such as closing your eyes, you may create obstacles in your ability to integrate your practice with everyday activities. For this reason I suggest that you experiment with keeping your eyes open.

Three different gazes can be used when the eyes remain open. In the first, the gaze is down, lightly resting about two to three feet in front of the body. The second method is to look forward in a normal everyday way. The third method is to slightly raise the gaze. It's very good to alternate these styles. Using only one of the eye positions for a long time can become quite boring or tiring, while changing the eye position can revitalize the meditation. Also, don't try to control blinking your eyes. When you blink, just blink. Trying to control blinking creates tension.

Tips for Meditation

Find a position you can hold for at least twenty minutes without moving. If you have to work up to this, fine. Hold the position for one minute or five minutes. Then increase it a minute every day. It's helpful to pick an amount of time to meditate and stick with it, so that you do not spend your meditation asking: "Can I stop now? Is this enough pain? Is this too much pain?" Committing to holding a posture for one minute outweighs the benefits of twenty minutes of mental wiggling.

Once you have chosen a particular posture for your meditation session, take a moment to do a body scan for tension. Check on the jaw, the mouth, the neck, and the position of the chin. Try to release any tension. Pay close attention to the shoulders. Often you need to pull them down in a self-conscious effort. Check for tension in the hands, the fingers, the back, and the ankles. Make whatever adjustments are necessary for stability and comfort.

Try to relax 100 percent. This means that whatever you experience is allowed. If you still have some tension left in your body, that's OK. More important than a relaxed body is a relaxed mind, so do your best with

your posture and then let your mind relax. If you approach meditation as a sports competition or as a big-deal project, the body develops tension. If you associate meditation with sauna-style relaxation, then your body might cave in and you might fall asleep. The midpoint between loose and tight is what you want for your body and your mind.

The Two-Point Meditation Posture

When practicing meditation off your cushion, or if your circumstances only allow for practice while waiting in line or walking down the street or riding a bus, then you have the two-point instruction: keep your back straight and keep your muscles relaxed. That's it.

Meeting the Monkey-Mind

People new to meditation commonly report that the minute they sit down, their minds speed up, and even more thoughts than usual flood in. This is the effect of meeting the monkey-mind, the mind that chatters uncontrollably, flitting here and there. We might approach meditation with the expectation that our mind will become calm and serene, but when we sit down to meditate it's as if we just drank espresso. The mind seems to fly in a dozen different directions, from food to fame, to winning a lottery ticket to buying a flashy car to eating an organic hamburger. It might feel like a roller-coaster ride—wild, crazy, and maybe even a little scary. Actually this is a good sign, because the monkey-mind always acts this way, naturally caffeinated and kind of high-strung. That is monkey-mind's habit. We just never noticed it before.

If we bring a monkey into a nice shrine room, within minutes the fancy Chinese silk will be shredded, water bowls will be thrown onto the floor, cushions will be torn apart, and everything will be made topsy-turvy as the monkey flits from one object to another. This may not be such a flattering picture, but this is how our mind tends to function—never resting, reaching out toward one object after another, messing things up, and racing from here to there. When we attentively engage in

physical or mental work, like building a house, preparing for an exam, or doing our income taxes, we keep the monkey at the door. But with a lot of free time, the monkey usually takes over.

I once heard about a man who had been in solitary confinement for years and who had just been released after new DNA tests proved his innocence. He said of being alone in a cell: "Having only yourself for company is the worst company you could ask for." This expresses the anguish of a mind torturing itself, without the relief of external distractions—let alone meditation.

The monkey cannot stand being out of a job, so to keep itself busy, it keeps the mind spinning. Let's say at the end of the month you discover that your bank statement is different from your own calculations by one dollar. The monkey is so happy! It convinces you to study all the statements and track down where the mistake occurred. Once you solve that problem, another arises.

In private interviews, I hear about problems with family members, partners, and employers. When you listen, the problems sound so small. But if you think about that problem again and again, it gets bigger and bigger. Making a mountain out of a molehill is the monkey's specialty. This is the nature of the restless monkey-mind.

Generally we do not observe the mind itself, so this encounter with the monkey can be confusing. But actually we are beginning to recognize awareness and all the thoughts, feelings, and impulses that are constantly moving through it. If people come to meditation in order to get rid of thoughts, this encounter with the monkey-mind might be disheartening. But we do not have to get rid of the monkey-mind. Ignoring this thought-factory never works, and suppressing it is impossible. But we can befriend it. How do we do this? By hanging around. We're not aggressive. We do not try to conquer or control our new friend, but if we want to get to know its qualities, we have to stay present for the encounter. When we begin to meditate, no matter what style or tradition we follow, we will surely meet the monkey. But with awareness meditation, we give the monkey a constructive job to do.

Saljay Rinpoche compared our monkey-mind to the boss of a company, whose job is to make everyone work as much as possible, 24–7.

Saljay Rinpoche at Sherab Ling circa 1988.

The mind that bosses us around doesn't let up. It constantly pushes us to think about one thing after another, without interruption, and mostly without any significant consequences. All these mind-activities are like the dozens of workers employed by the company, enslaved to whatever the boss dictates, while we, the servants, have no idea how to negotiate a better deal because we're convinced that we are the boss, not the slave.

Our identification with the monkey-boss turns us into an ego slave: "Here is chocolate; I love chocolate! I must have it. I hate spinach! I like that fellow. I don't like that one. That car is ugly. That one is beautiful." The monkey yanks the mind this way, now that way. This mind looks like turbulent waves on the surface of the lake without rest or tranquillity. We rush to respond from one order from the monkey-boss to the next. We might even think, "Wait a second! Maybe I could boss that monkey around once in a while!" But we do not know how.

Then Saljay Rinpoche explained that like and dislike, acceptance and rejection, aversion and attraction—all the messages that the monkey uses to keep us in a state of turmoil—are projections. These projections filter sense data, which then create attitudes that we superimpose onto the objects of our senses. In this way, a smell is hardly ever just a smell, but a pleasing, aromatic sense experience that attracts us, or an unpleasant smell that triggers aversion. Birds make attractive sounds, barking dogs do not. These reactions respond to preconceived attitudes and ideas, not to the actual situation or object.

"We are always responding to the projections, but we do not know how to work the projector," said Saljay Rinpoche. "The projector is the monkey-mind, the boss. It will not help to hate the monkey. That just traps the mind in negativity and gives the monkey more power. Trying to lock the monkey away will not work because it will always figure out how to escape. But do not become a slave to the monkey-mind. The trick is to give the monkey-mind a job. Monkey-mind loves jobs, loves to work, and loves to keep busy. You make the monkey-mind your employee, and you become the boss."

In the beginning of our dharma practice, the monkey cannot work at the same task for long. It gets bored and restless, and reverts to making a mess. In order for us to stay in control, we not only give the monkey a job, but we change tasks frequently enough to keep it engaged. As we gain more control, we can train the monkey to work for us full-time. But that doesn't happen overnight, and so Saljay Rinpoche encouraged his students to keep the intention set on the recognition of awareness, but then to switch the methods of meditation and to shift the supports.

Awareness Meditation

When we practice ngondro, we can alternate our supports for awareness. We can move from using the breath for support, to looking at a flower or listening to a sound. And what happens when our monkey-mind pops up screaming, "Pay attention to me! We must replay this past episode and anticipate the future"? If we are using the breath for support, we come back to the breath. Without judging ourselves, without getting discouraged or feeling hopeless, we just come back to the breath and get on with it.

Various forms of shamata, or awareness meditation, teach us how to uncover our innate qualities of mind, and the most common will use the breath to support our recognition of awareness. This works with feeling sensation. Breath is the most common support because it is available in all circumstances and conditions, which explains why we so often hear, "Come back to the breath." If we get lost in discursive thinking, if we get lost inside a past experience or disappear into a black hole of anger or jealousy: "Come back to the breath." The nature of the breath makes it the most reliable support, especially for new students.

Let's try meditating using the breath as support for awareness. But first, before purposely doing any particular meditation exercise, it's good to start with just resting your mind. Just that. For now, remain in whatever informal posture you are in. To get a sense of how it feels to rest the mind, think about how you rest in daily life. If you jog for a few miles, what happens when you stop or take a break? Imagine cleaning the house for an hour or two, and then stopping to rest. Imagine that first moment of taking a break. Or imagine coming home to an apartment tower in Hong Kong or Minneapolis and learning that the electricity has gone off. The generators aren't working, so you have to walk up two flights of stairs, or maybe ten or twenty. Finally you reach your apartment, get a glass of water, and sink into the couch. Aaahhh. Something like that. Think of an activity that requires extra effort, and then practice a silent version of this release. Just rest. Just relax the mind, even for a few seconds. Aaahhh.

Try that. Then rest.

Rest for a few more seconds.

Then come out of resting. How was that?

Now I have one big secret: resting the mind this way is meditation. Yet if I say that beforehand, you might start off with some big expectation and become tense and anxious, and that's not helpful. Yet that sense of resting, of allowing whatever arises to just be, without trying to control anything, that mind of "aaaaaahhhhhhhhh" comes close to natural awareness. We call this "open awareness" or "shamata without support."

When I say that this mind comes close to open awareness, I mean that without the intention to meditate, you will not benefit much from just the experience. Motivation and intention help you realize awareness. But if you infuse your intentions with too much hope and expectation, they may lead to disappointment. You want to combine your purposeful intention with the relaxed mind of resting.

This exercise can be repeated many times. Don't try to hold on to the awareness. When you find your mind wandering, just come back to the exercise and start again.

Now let's try a more formal approach to meditation. The practice is shamata, or awareness meditation. We use our breath as the object that supports our awareness.

Awareness Meditation with Breath

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Your eyes can be open or closed.
- Take a minute or two to rest in open awareness. Perhaps bring to mind that feeling of sinking into a chair to rest after strenuous exertion: aaahhh.
- Now breathe normally through your mouth, nose, or both.
- Bring your awareness to your breath as it flows in and out.
- At the end of the out-breath, rest your awareness in the gap that comes naturally before the next inhalation.
- If your mind wanders, simply bring it back to the breath.

- Continue this for five to ten minutes.
- Conclude the exercise with resting in open awareness.

Breath is the most common object of awareness for people new to meditation. But you can use anything that arises in your experience to support awareness: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, or sensations. You can choose an external object such as a flower, a statue, burning incense—anything at all. You repeat all the first steps as you did above, including taking a few minutes to rest in open awareness. You use this to gather your body and mind.

If you have chosen a form, then just rest your eyes lightly on the form. There is no need to investigate, analyze, judge, or assess what you see. You are just seeing. If you have chosen a sound, then just listen. Don't try to block other sensory experiences, such as nearby movement, sounds, smells, or changes in temperature. All your senses are open. You can accommodate your recognition of any sense experience while maintaining a steady awareness of the object that you have chosen. You might want to try this for five or ten minutes at a time.

Open Awareness

Even at the beginning stages of meditation, you can experiment with allowing your awareness to shift from the object to awareness itself. This might happen naturally, yet you still need to know that it's fine to allow for it, so that you don't try to block this shift. You may naturally fall into what is called open awareness—awareness that does not use an object to steady itself. Then when the mind wanders, you come back to the object as a way of steadying your recognition of awareness.

With more practice, you can learn to rely on daily life experiences for meditation. You are not restricted to ideas that you might have about supports or about place, or the appropriate time or posture for your practice. You become freed from attempts to "concentrate" or "focus," and you trust more in a spacious, relaxed awareness that allows you to accommodate all of your experience and to use everything toward

the endeavor to awaken. Even when you work with the breath, try to make the shift from focusing on the breath to being aware of the breath. Whatever object you choose for "shamata with an object," you try to make the shift from the object of support to awareness itself. Once you can steady the mind on the nature of awareness, you might drop the object altogether. This becomes shamata without object, which is the same as open awareness.

You practice open awareness with 100 percent relaxation, meaning that whatever arises is perfect just the way it is. You just let the monkey-mind do its crazy monkey-mind thing. The monkey doesn't need to relax. The monkey does not know how to relax. That's its nature. The monkey might be running wild or taking a nap. But you are no longer one with the monkey. You are one with awareness. If you relax 200 percent, then you get pulled in one of two directions: you try so strenuously to force relaxation that you become more tense, or you become so loose that you slump over and fall asleep. So 100 percent is just right. Every time you begin meditation, it's helpful to start with open awareness. Just rest the mind for a few minutes. Just rest.

Here's another secret: You know the real obstacle to resting meditation? It's too simple. There's no "wow" experience, there's nothing added, and there's no work to do. It's as close as the tip of your nose, meaning it's too close to see. Sometimes teachers tell us: "Stop meditating." This does not mean to give up awareness, but rather: "Don't use a flashlight in the sunshine." Assuming that we're inherently insufficient, we use the mind's equivalent of a flashlight to improve on the sun.

Open awareness is like space. We speak of space and refer to it, but actually we don't recognize it. We only see what is in space. When we do talk about seeing space, we usually mean the valley, table, tree, or something that brings definition or perspective to an area, but not to space itself. In the same way that we might not believe in the benefits of recognizing space, the practice of open awareness tends to lack credibility. We don't really believe in its benefits, like the idea that we do not value what comes free. We seem to need to pay a price to guarantee value. With meditation, we pay this price with exercises that actually require more work than open awareness does: awareness with objects.

Here the mind cannot just rest with no job to do; it must extend itself to specific sense objects for supports.

It is always good to begin any meditation exercise with a minute or two of open awareness. This connects us to our basic state of mind. Even if the winds of anxiety, fear, anger, or jealousy churn up the surface of a lake, underneath it remains clear and calm. It is very important to understand this, because too often we think, "I am too agitated to meditate." Or "My anger or jealousy is destroying my equanimity." Nothing can destroy our equanimity. We can lose touch with it, but it cannot be destroyed. How wonderful! However, we have not yet developed enough connection with our basic awareness to trust in its reliability—or even in its existence. If we are in a rage or stuck inside a knot of passion, we tend to experience it as all-consuming, as if the lake had turbulent waves at the bottom as well as on the surface. But it's not like that. We have this pristine, clear, luminous awareness when we are happy and when we are sad, when we are angry or depressed, or when we are joyful and energetic. Awareness is not tied to emotions or thoughts. It's not contingent on circumstances or conditions.

Connecting to this awareness is essential for understanding what we mean by "basic goodness." This awareness has no solidity, no fixity, and no measurement, yet it remains the ground of our being. We have this awareness no matter how chaotic or preoccupied our mind is, no matter how much the monkey controls the show. This is why we say that we do not have to get rid of our negative thoughts or push them away. If we bring conscious awareness to the forefront of mental activity, the monkey-mind automatically loses its power.

Befriending Thoughts

Most of us have experienced being driven crazy by our thoughts. "If only I could stop thinking about that person. That incident. That fight with my boss, with my partner . . ." Endless thoughts, even when they lead to no benefit, just circling around like bees in a jar. Once these thoughts are identified as the problem, we want to get rid of them. Thoughts can be a great ally to meditation, but we tend to make them

our enemies. We think that during meditation, anything is better than having thoughts. "All day long I am thinking, thinking. But in meditation I can hang out in the deep, pure, thoughtless void. Bliss. Nothingness. Pure. Peaceful. How wonderful." Then what happens? Our mind spins as much during meditation as at other times. At that point, instead of realizing our hopes of bliss and peace, we start a little war with our thoughts: "Bad thoughts! Go away!"

Many strategies exist to annihilate thoughts, such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, overeating, needless shopping, or surfing the Internet—activities that narrow the mind through addiction and compulsion. Nowadays many people have the idea that meditation offers an effective, sane way to get rid of unwanted thoughts. Many people think that the goal of paying attention to a flower, for example, is to suppress or push away thoughts. This might work for a few seconds, but when we release our tight focus on the object, the thoughts flood right back into our mind. There is no lasting or transformative benefit.

Meditation does offer a sane way to work with our mind. But we do not meditate to get rid of thoughts. This is the number one misunderstanding. Thinking, like breathing, is a natural activity. Trying to impose an artificial blankness is the exact opposite of how we work with the natural clarity of mind.

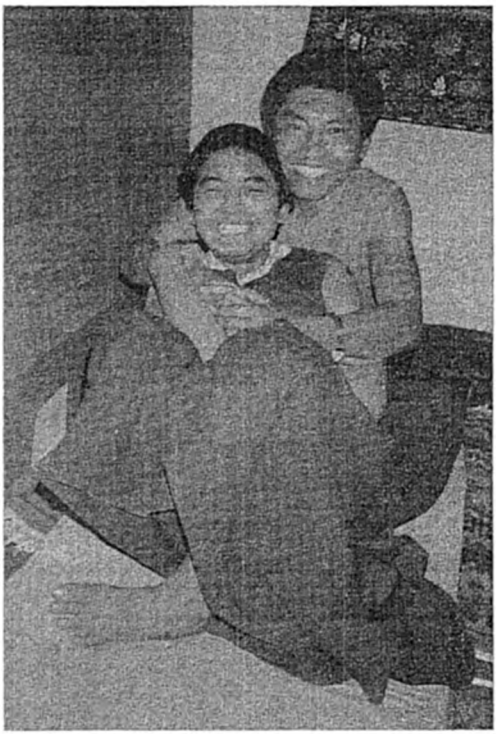
An incident from my first days at Sherab Ling introduced me to making friends with thoughts. At that time, the monastery was still more like old Tibet than modern India. There was no indoor plumbing, and it took several minutes to walk from my room to the bathroom. One day I tried to push open the window above the toilet, but it was stuck. I started banging on the window, until suddenly it flew open and slammed into the outside wall, cracking the glass. My anxieties went out of control. I was afraid that people at the monastery would not like me, that they would think I was stupid, that my attendant and tutors would be angry with me, and that when my great crime was discovered I would be scolded.

For two days I said nothing, and no one said anything to me. But the cracked glass was all I thought about. Then I decided that before anyone noticed the broken window, I should turn myself in. I described the situ-

ation to the manager of maintenance, who said, "No problem." He then explained that the window was old, and the wooden frame was rotted and needed to be replaced anyway. I left him feeling quite relieved.

Soon, however, thoughts of my bad deed returned. When I was studying dharma texts, the image of cracked glass would suddenly appear and I would panic. The image haunted me, and my heart would speed up. I tried to get rid of it. Impossible. Then I would scold myself: "Don't be so stupid. Even the maintenance manager said it was not a problem." Finally I explained my situation to Saljay Rinpoche and asked, "Can I get rid of my thoughts?"

Saljay Rinpoche told me, "You cannot get rid of your thoughts. But that's OK. You do not have to. Maybe your thoughts can become your best friend. You can learn to make thoughts your allies."[iii]



Mingyur Rinpoche (in front) and Tsoknyi Rinpoche at Sherab Ling, circa 1989.

I did not fully understand, but I got this much: the difference between treating my thoughts as friends and treating them as enemies defined the difference between happiness and suffering. I still did not understand how to make friends with my thoughts. But I began to understand that trying to defeat these thoughts or wipe them out actually maintained the intensity of both the situation and the suffering.

Normally our monkey-mind is in the driver's seat. One thought leads to another and we cannot stop them, and often they drive us crazy. When we cultivate awareness, we no longer fall into the river. Awareness itself allows us to stand at the river's edge without getting sucked into the current. We are liberated from the tyranny of the monkey-mind. Thoughts are still there. They may be quiet or turbulent, focused or wild and scattered. But we have stopped identifying with them. We have become the awareness, not the thoughts. With the recognition of awareness, we can stand back and watch thoughts, and know that we are watching them. We no longer need to get rid of them because they are no longer pushing us around. Identifying with our natural awareness, and not the thoughts, dissolves their destructive power.

Using Thoughts as Support for Meditation

When we start to meditate, the breath or a bell or a flower are the most common objects of support. When our mind wanders, we come back to these supports. But there is another option: using thoughts themselves to support the recognition of awareness. When we stay aware of our thoughts, we do not follow the story line, and we do not get pushed around by the monkey-boss, but instead we simply remain nonreactively watchful of the thoughts passing through the mind.

Let's try doing this. Start with watching your thoughts as if they were a fly buzzing around your head. You keep your eyes open and jerk your head to the left, to the right, up and down, all the time watching monkey-mind quickly zip from one thought to another. Yada, yada, yada, pizza, plans, partner, airplane tickets, watching, watching. Try doing that for a few minutes.

Many people find this exercise quite difficult, even though we are merely continuing what actually goes on in our mind most of the time. But when we put the process under the looking glass, we seem to freeze up. Watching the crazy monkey-mind in an intentional manner tends to break the patterns, making the exercise difficult.

Now let's try a somewhat more formal meditation using our thoughts as the object of support.

Meditation Using Thoughts as Support for Awareness

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Your eyes can be open or closed.
- Take a minute or two to rest in open awareness.
- Then allow thoughts to arise. Bring your awareness to the thinking itself. Observe your thoughts with awareness. Don't try to change the thoughts or "try" to make them disappear. Just turn toward your thoughts with awareness. Don't try to analyze, interpret, or judge your thoughts. Simply observe them.
- If thoughts disappear naturally, rest in open awareness.
- When thoughts return, simply use them as the support for your awareness.
- If you get carried away by thoughts, then gently bring the mind back to the process of just staying aware of thoughts.
- Try this for five to ten minutes.
- Conclude with resting in open awareness.

For many people, trying to stay aware of thoughts tends to make thoughts disappear. This is fine. Let them go. Don't put energy into holding on to them. In fact, often this inability to hold the thoughts leads to open awareness, so just let that happen. But the effect of this meditation over time is that even when your thoughts remain, they do not carry you away. Awareness channels the power of the monkey-mind in a different direction. As long as you are just watching thoughts and

not getting sucked into the current, this is meditation. You are following your own orders to practice awareness. In this way, you use thoughts to liberate yourself from thoughts.

Thoughts do not stop. But you can stop rushing after them. The recognition of awareness now defines your mind, which reduces ego-fixation and clinging. Anything that helps dissolve a solid sense of self or of an independent "I" works to your benefit. The mind that recognizes awareness is no longer "all about me."

Placing awareness on awareness itself means that we stop identifying with and rushing toward the mind-movements of our thoughts and emotions. When this happens, we can speak of remaining steady in any circumstance. That includes mental and physical circumstances, inside and outside circumstances. We can remain steady in the midst of a storm or in sunshine, or in the midst of pleasant or unpleasant sensations, wanted or unwanted thoughts, constructive or destructive emotions.

Setting the Intention

Whatever practice you do, specifying the motivation is crucial. If you set a round object on a hill, such as a car tire, it will roll downward. Realizing awareness works the same way: once you set your intention, the mind will go in that direction. The target is not the object; awareness is the object. This is why you call the "object" your support. You use it as a tool to access the mind of awareness. Once you use your support to collect the mind, you set your intention, and then allow for a shift from object to awareness.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche used to tell me, "Whatever practice you do, the most important aspect is awareness. Awareness has everything. Once you recognize awareness, all the practices become important. If you have not realized awareness, then even if you practice all sorts of wonderful special or advanced methods, it will not really help your realization."

Don't worry if your mind wanders. Don't judge yourself, or get angry, or think you are alone. Everyone's mind wanders. That's fine. When

you get entangled with your thoughts, come back to your support—the breath or whatever you have selected. You wander away. You come back. This is how you learn. Coming back to the object—for example, the breath—provides the support you need to steady the mind so that you can recognize awareness. When you use meditation to become aware of the breath, the mind that pays attention to the breath automatically realizes awareness. To put it another way: using an object as support allows awareness to realize itself. You do not have to push your mind away from the support. That will happen naturally, but you must allow for it by not fixating on the object and by maintaining the intention to recognize awareness.

Meditation is a mind-activity. Everywhere the mind goes, the opportunity for meditation exists. The idea that meditation is something that we only do sitting on a cushion in a particular way or at a particular time has created a lot of confusion. Yet if we can recognize awareness anywhere, anytime, we may ask why we make such a big deal out of meditation, with our cushions and mats and seven-point posture. The answer is that we have developed a very strong identification with our monkey-mind. In order to shift our identity to our natural awareness, we need aids, supports, and methods. We all need these strategies, but don't confuse them with the true meaning of meditation. We are not training in order to learn about objects. We are training to learn about our mind, because our mind holds the source of all possibilities—good and bad, happy and sad, sane and neurotic. Freedom exists within our very own heart and mind.

The biggest obstacle for my own ngondro students is that they think that ngondro and meditation are two separate practices. They are not. My students are always saying things like, "Actually I prefer meditation practice to doing prostrations or mantra." Once we start our path of dharma, every practice is an awareness practice. As we progress, every activity is an awareness practice—or at least an opportunity to practice awareness. Every waking moment provides this opportunity.

To remain steady in the midst of chaos or contentment is a reasonable description of our goal. But we need to make a distinction

between process and result. The process of recognizing awareness definitely affects the monkey-mind. Our ordinary mental activity will not be as scattered and reactive as it might have been before. Cultivating the recognition of awareness definitely tends to result in a quieter mind. Yet our approach is to keep recognition of awareness as our target, and then to allow whatever happens to happen. This intention is of utmost importance.

And actually, what tends to happen—when we allow it to—is that our mind settles down. But we do not focus on becoming calm or pursuing a specific result. If we fixate on remaining calm, we cannot know this calmness in a lasting way. But if we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness, we comprehend that awareness itself is inherently calm. This is the nature of awareness, no matter how turbulent our mind becomes. The steadfast calm of awareness is always with us. This allows us to discover a sense of peace and stability that is not dependent on the presence or absence of pleasant or unpleasant feelings. Once we get a taste of this, our mind naturally quiets down. In this way, even though being calm is not the target, nonetheless it is the result. With practice, we access the calm awareness within the turbulence of our mind. Once we shift our perspective and stabilize our intention, even painful thoughts and feelings can function as pathways to this recognition. This leads to a tremendous confidence in our ability to work with whatever arises. In the midst of internal or external turmoil, we trust in the flawless reliability of our own awareness.

Step by Step

Dharma practice develops gradually. Let's say that our first experience of seeing the moon is a flat, two-dimensional picture shown to us by a friend. Our friend describes the shape, the color, and the qualities of the moon. These are like the words that describe dharma to beginners. We use concepts to point beyond concepts. Normally when we begin, our understanding of dharma involves words, images, letters, and feelings. We are here, and we point to the dharma over there.

As we practice, our experience transforms our capacity to see the moon, and then we can see the moon reflected in the lake. This moon image is more animated and has more vibrancy than either a flat image or words. Our buddha nature is the moon. And we are using concepts to go beyond concepts.

The next level is direct realization. We see the moon directly—without conceptualization. Now there are no words, no descriptions, no preconceptions. Just naked awareness. We have become what we have been pointing to. There's no separation between here and there, between "me" and dharma. At first we see a sliver of the moon. We have a little realization. This is the beginning of direct realization. We do not become a buddha at this level, but we are free from samsara, free from dukkha. When we see our true nature totally, it's like seeing the full moon. At that moment, we have completed the path of realization, which means: there is nothing more to realize. From then on, we practice dharma to deepen and stabilize our realization.

By using the language of our relative-reality mind, we make helpful distinctions—but words and concepts are only means to instruct us. This division of awareness into three categories—normal awareness, meditative awareness, and pure awareness—offers a tool to aid our understanding of the one, indivisible awareness. There is only one awareness. This is our innate, natural quality of mind. Everyone has this. We speak of the western sky or the eastern sky. But there is only one sky. Awareness is as indivisible as sky.

Meditation and Daily Life

Nowadays people learn meditation for peace, for stress reduction, or for blissing out. These efforts have some positive aspects, especially if one identifies the mind as the source of difficulties and the source of happiness. But often these efforts fall into the category of meditation as an activity that has a beginning and an end: "Now I am meditating, and later I am not meditating."

The dilemma here is that any positive results of the meditation tend

to be short-lived. There's little attention paid to integrating meditation with daily activities. Meditation has been separated from the view and intention of wisdom and compassion. A meditation muscle may be developed, but the purpose is not clear, so it remains difficult to discover genuine liberation.

The real measure is what happens off the cushion. If there is no sign of change in daily life activities, then the full benefits of meditation are not being accomplished. If our neighbor's dog pees on our lawn, or the waiter brings our soup cold or our flight is canceled, and we become as angry or exasperated as we did before we ever started to meditate, then something is missing.

When we understand the view, we know where we are headed, and we can apply this to all our daily life activities. The view is the understanding that our true nature, the essence of awareness itself, is fundamentally pure and whole and has all the wonderful qualities that normally we think we lack. Without carrying this view into our activities, formal sitting practice may become dry and lifeless. We might end up like dolls sitting perfectly still on the shelves of toy stores. It might look like we're doing everything right, yet somehow awakening remains beyond reach.

All the stages of ngondro involve the cultivation of meditative awareness. The transition from meditative awareness to the third type of awareness—pure awareness—varies according to different traditions. In my tradition, pure awareness is "pointed out" by a guide or teacher who has already recognized the nature of mind. We call these "pointing-out teachings on the nature of mind." We may have everything that we need to awaken, but pure awareness may elude recognition precisely because it is so simple and ordinary. Often people assume that awakening involves some spectacular, new experience, so we wait for this miraculous event, and all the while we have never been separated from this pure awareness. The guide or teacher or guru introduces us to what we have not been able to recognize within ourselves.

In my tradition, pointing-out instructions on the nature of mind are sometimes given when students first begin the foundation practices, and

sometimes not until the student has completed various practices. If you have already received pointing-out instructions, then you can do the ngondro practices as a way to deepen and stabilize your recognition of pure awareness.

Whichever type of awareness we apply, each ngondro practice provides an opportunity for recognizing something about awareness that we might not have seen before. Buddhism is filled with many wonderful ideas, but it is the recognition of awareness that takes us from samara to nirvana.

3. Glimpses of My Gurus

Everything I know about dharma comes from my own gurus, so you might want to know something about them. I grew up in a very different time than my teachers. I first traveled to the West when I was in my early twenties, and I have learned some English. My way of saying things may differ from my teachers; my examples and references and my interest in science and psychology are new. But in every essential way, these teachings are the same as those my teachers taught me. World circumstances have changed from the time that my teachers trained in Tibet, but the human mind has not, which means that ngondro continues to be as relevant and beneficial for people today as it was many years ago.

Some people have many teachers, and others only one. There is no right and wrong number. I have had four main teachers: my father Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, Saljay Rinpoche, and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. Khen Rinpoche was the only one that I met as a young man; the others I met when I was a child. But the more I connect with their awakened wisdom, which continues every day, the more I experience them as the same in essence—one mind with no difference.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche

My father was always kind and loving, giving me candies and kissing me good night on the cheek—not so common for Tibetan fathers. When I got a little older, I thought of him as a boss or a minister because everyone around him, including high lamas and foreigners, treated him

as a big deal. In the midst of any disagreement, they would say, "Let's ask Tulku Urgyen." These people seemed very impressed that I was my father's son, which made me quite proud. Yet I still perceived my father as an old guy who wore glasses and was sick with diabetes. Once I started taking teachings from him, his physical aspects faded into the background, and his wisdom became the object of my interest. It's what I wanted to see and hear. From then on, I related to him as my guru, and in some ways more as a guru than as a father.

Even before I started taking teachings from my father, there were times when my little boy's experience of him turned my reality upside down. I remember one instance quite clearly. My father had a reputation for receiving anyone, no exceptions. One afternoon a minister from the king of Nepal's retinue was expected to visit. The kitchen was in a high state of anticipation, preparing special sweets and tea, and excitement was growing among the nuns and foreigners. Yet you would never have guessed from my father's behavior that anything out of the ordinary was happening that day. I myself assumed that he would change into special robes, but he did not. The minister arrived dressed in elegant silk clothes and spoke in a sophisticated, educated style. They chatted for a while and seemed to enjoy each other's company.

Minutes after the minister left, a local beggar came by to discuss some problem with my father. His feet were caked with dirt, his hair matted, and his clothes torn. I saw the beggar that way, dirty and shabby. Looking back, I'm not sure that my father would relate to that description. I don't think the man's external form was foremost in my father's perception, because one of my father's special qualities was that he seemed to recognize the buddha-essence of each and every being he encountered. My father invited the beggar to share the sweets and special tea that had been prepared for the minister. There was no change in his voice or in his concern for his visitor. He treated both exactly the same. He valued both exactly the same. Even as a child, with no words to express my wonder, I knew this was unusual.

We may not identify this behavior as what we are looking for in an enlightened teacher. But if we examine our own behavior and take a look at the people we know, we can appreciate how exceptional it is.

Then we might be inspired to imagine what kind of mind manifests that behavior, and to ask: What kind of information is such a mind working with? Not the values of samsara. Not the grasping of ego-fixation or the hierarchies of social conventions. When we speak of "calm abiding," we are not referring to a calm situation, such as meditating in a quiet, beautiful place. We are speaking of a mind that stays steady in the midst of fluctuating circumstances.

His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche

Tai Situ Rinpoche is the abbot of Sherab Ling Monastery where I lived for many years, and he continues to be a most important teacher for me. We first met when I was only four or five years old, and I had no sense of

The Twelfth Tai Situ Rinpoche in Bodh Gaya, 2008.

our future together—although he did. At that time, my mother and her parents had taken me with them on pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist sites in India. We had been to Tso Pema, the lake in western Himachal Pradesh where Guru Rinpoche had meditated, and there we received teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. On that same trip, we visited Bodh Gaya, the site of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment,

The Eleventh Tai Situ Rinpoche,
Pema Wangchug Gyalpo (1886–1952).

and Sarnath, where the Buddha first taught the dharma. And we visited my brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who is ten years older than I am, and who was studying at Tashi Jong, half an hour from Sherab Ling. Then we made an appointment to meet with Tai Situ Rinpoche. My grandfather, Lama Tashi Dorje, and the previous Tai Situ Rinpoche had been together at Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet.

During our first visit to Sherab Ling, Situ Rinpoche told my grandfather, "The [Sixteenth] Karmapa told me that this boy is a reincarnation of the previous Mingyur Rinpoche." My grandfather had some vague information about this, but I had not been formally recognized, and only then did this identification become clear to my family. On leaving Sherab Ling my grandmother said to me, "Wow, you are a very important little boy."

I asked her, "What do you mean that I'm an 'important boy'?"

She said, "You are a *tulku,*" meaning the reincarnation of someone who had developed spiritual attributes, and is therefore endowed with an enhanced potential for spiritual accomplishment.

The next day we returned to see Tai Situ Rinpoche, and this time my grandfather asked him to give us long-life empowerments. This ritual included ingesting a long-life pill—a mix of special herbal medicines and sweets—and a long-life nectar. Situ Rinpoche prepared one set of pills and nectar for my family and a separate set for me—a delicious mix of *tsampa* (barley flour), butter, and sugar. The special distinction of having this made just for me, as well as the sweetness, made this a happy occasion.

Then Tai Situ Rinpoche told me, "In the future, you would be most welcome to come and study at my monastery." And that's just what I did, about six years later.

At the time of my first meeting with Tai Situ Rinpoche, I felt that I had known him from before. Later on, I learned that all of the previous Mingyur Rinpoches—I am the seventh—were always under the guidance of the Tai Situ Rinpoches; and that my own monastery in Kham in eastern Tibet is a branch of Palpung Monastery, the traditional seat of the Tai Situ lineage.

Saljay Rinpoche

My father and Saljay Rinpoche knew each other in Tibet. Later, at Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim, the seat of the Karmapas, they were both teachers for the young monks and tulkus. Saljay Rinpoche was a tulku and had studied with the previous Tai Situ at Palpung Monastery. In 1959, he fled Tibet to escape the Chinese and eventually came to Sherab Ling to be with the young Tai Situ Rinpoche.

Saljay Rinpoche and my father shaped my early years in dharma. Their teachings were so close in both view and expression that they continuously reaffirmed each other. In many ways it was like studying with one teacher in two different bodies, and sometimes I mix up what I learned from which one.

With both my father and Saljay Rinpoche, I experienced their kindness and compassion before understanding their wisdom. Both of them made every effort to help anyone, no matter how difficult the circumstances. Among the Tibetans in Bir, an exile settlement near Sherab Ling, Saljay Rinpoche was known for his kind heart, and they would call on him to say prayers for family members who were sick or ask him to come to their homes to perform rituals for the dying. He never said, "I am too busy" or "It is too difficult to get there." Bir was a half-hour drive from the monastery but the roads were very winding, which could be dangerous in winter or during the monsoons.

Two years after I first arrived at Sherab Ling and shortly after I had been formally enthroned as the Seventh Mingyur Rinpoche, I was woken up in the middle of the night by a loud banging on my door. For several minutes neither my attendant nor I responded. It is common for tulkus to have attendants, and mine slept in an adjacent room. We were both hoping that whoever was banging would just go away. Finally I told my attendant to investigate the noise. Three people from Bir stood outside the door shivering in the cold. They explained that their father had just died, and they had driven to Sherab Ling to ask me to please come now to be with their father's body and perform the special rituals for the dead. I was twelve years old and did not know those special prayers, and I was very sleepy. It was winter, and frost covered my windows. I did not want to get out from under my warm bedding, and I told my attendant to say that I would come the next morning at eight o'clock. When they left I was so angry at having been woken up that I could not fall back to sleep.

The next morning my attendant arranged for a car to take us to Bir. I was nervous because I assumed that I would be the first lama to enter the house, and I was not sure what to do. But upon arriving, I learned that after I turned down the family's request, they woke Saljay Rinpoche and he went to Bir with them. When I found out that Saljay Rinpoche, an old man, had left his warm bed to go out on a cold night, I was really surprised and moved, and I was ashamed of my behavior. This recognition of his boundless compassion deepened with time, but my complete trust in him began with that experience.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche

I first heard about Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche shortly before I moved to Sherab Ling. Many evenings at Nagi Gompa, Westerners crowded into my father's small room for teachings. Sometimes my father would begin by asking for world news. At that time we had no electricity, so no radio or television. This was like my father's private BBC Newshour. One person might report on the election of a new American president, or on meetings between the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Chinese authorities, or about an earthquake in South America.

One evening a student reported, "Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche is in Tibet."

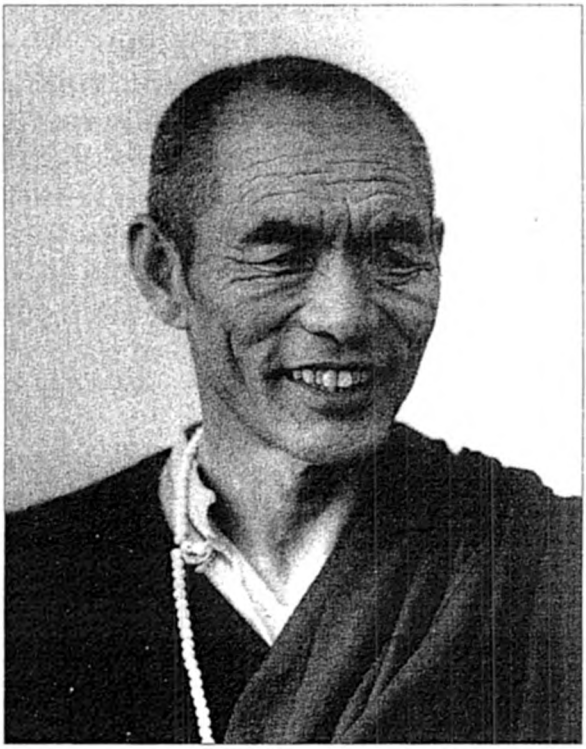
My father was really surprised and asked, "Are you sure? Did he get a visa? How do you know this?"

The student told my father that he was sure that Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was in Kathok Monastery in Kham, which is one of the six main monasteries of the Nyingma lineage in Tibet. My father said, "Wow! This is really great news! How fortunate for the people of Tibet to have a great enlightened master like that visit."

Later that evening my father said to me: "You should make a big effort to take teachings from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche."

Yet for the next two years I was mostly at Sherab Ling, and after I started the three-year retreat, I never left there. When my retreat ended, I immediately went to Nepal to visit my family. At that time my father once again said, "You should receive teachings from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche." He made it sound like an ordinary suggestion, like, "Maybe you should go down to the market and buy a new kerosene lamp." He didn't want me to feel pressured, but it turned out that my father had already approached Khen Rinpoche, and later he explained to me that it was very fortunate that I might have an opportunity to study with this great master.

While I was still in Nepal, I received word that I had been invited to attend the cremation ceremonies for Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche in Bhutan. This was in the fall of 1992, and the occasion for my first meeting Khen Rinpoche, which I remember as if it happened today. All conceptual



Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, circa 1988.

thinking left my mind. His eyes, his mouth, the way he moved his hands, the way he talked, the way he walked—everything was a teaching for me, with no verbal communication. He was so relaxed that he walked as if he had no muscles in his body. Yet he walked very fast, almost like he was gliding on ice, very smooth, without an ounce of tension. And he kept his eyes slightly raised, as if he never stopped meditating for an instant. His eyebrows spread across his face like wings and he hardly blinked, maybe once an hour. But he was not staring off in a stupor. Everything about him was completely natural and awake.

I was in Bhutan with three other monks: Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche, my friend Tenzin, and my attendant. One day during the ceremonies we were invited to Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche's rooms for lunch. There were two rooms, one leading to another, and we ate in the inner

room. I told him that I had heard about him from my father and that it was wonderful to finally meet him, and so forth. But most of the conversation was about Bhutan, because the four of us were setting off the next day to travel in Bhutan, which was Khen Rinpoche's resident country. He was telling us where to go, which sacred places to visit, what the roads were like, and things like that.

Toward the end of our lunch, an attendant came to tell Khen Rinpoche that some Westerners in the outside room wished to see him. He motioned for us to wait and stepped into the outer room, closing the door behind him. My friend Tenzin became so curious that he got down on his hands and knees with one cheek pressed to the floor so that he could peek into the outer room through the crack between the door and the floor. Then he reported that the Westerners had asked Rinpoche a question—and that he was answering it! At that point I joined my friend, with one cheek on the floor and my butt in the air.

Suddenly with no warning, an attendant opened the door, banging it into our heads. We turned bright red with embarrassment, but looked up and smiled and pretended it was normal to be on our hands and knees with our heads on the floor. The attendant was too kind to say anything, and Tulku Pema Rinpoche couldn't stop laughing.

When Khen Rinpoche rejoined us we were sitting properly, and I told him, "I really would like to receive teachings from you."

He did not say yes. He did not say no. He said, "Let's see." I felt great trust in him and wanted to learn from him as soon as possible, yet circumstances required that I wait several more years.

Eventually I did go to Bhutan, where I received the transmission of the Nyongtri lineage from Khen Rinpoche. *Nyongtri* means "experiential-teaching," and this lineage is also called the Great Hearing lineage of dzogchen. Traditionally one master transmitted this lineage to only one student during that master's entire life, and the process could take decades. This differs from other lineages, which mix experience with theory, the study of texts, or dialectics. Here, proceeding to the next level is based on experience only. The student cannot proceed to the next level until the master is completely satisfied that the student has embodied and realized the previous teaching. In my case, the transmission did not

take decades, but I did stay with Khen Rinpoche in Bhutan for many months, and these teachings continue to guide my life.

The Role of the Guru

When I was a child, I could not understand why we needed a living guru when we already had Shakyamuni Buddha. These days, I have no words to adequately express the significance of the guru's role. Practice itself affirms the value of the guru, but that might not happen right away. That's because people who come to dharma as adults and did not grow up in a Buddhist context often assume that the activity of practice will immediately make them happy. After all, we've already been told that we are inherently enlightened, we just need to cleanse some mud off our own diamond nature. How long could that take, and how much help could we need?

We may start with a big burst of enthusiasm, but what happens when nothing happens? Or when we experience the persistent force of our habitual emotional patterns, or when our frustrations and disappointments threaten to overwhelm our initial optimism? The whole arc of the path reaches toward liberation, but in order to cure the sickness of suffering, we must examine the cause. This means working with our most difficult issues, such as pride and arrogance, anger and greed—not in an abstract theoretical way, but in the most personal way possible. This is the mud of our mind, and it does take a while to cleanse, and we do need help. All of us.

We usually come to dharma still believing that external circumstances account for our dissatisfaction. We start off with little or no sense that the obstacles to liberation have been constructed by our mind—and can be deconstructed so that we can access our diamond qualities. And there are definitely times when the journey feels like slogging through swamps. Then what? If we want to climb Mount Everest, we find a guide who has already been there, someone who has traveled the terrain and knows the ropes, and has not just read books and watched movies about it.

All of our ngondro practices use means and methods to help disman-

tle the deceptions that have become second nature. We speak of letting go, letting go, letting go. We keep repeating this precisely because the ego's habit is to not let go. The ego's job is to prevent us from knowing who we really are, while the special function of the guru is to introduce us to ourselves.

Although three of my four teachers have died, I am still learning new things from them. Something that I might not have understood clearly, or thought I understood when I did not, may suddenly become clear. I might apply a teaching that I heard years ago to some current confusion, and then their wisdom manifests as a living reality. Their guidance continues to inspire me, and my gratitude for their love and concern continues to deepen. We might feel great love for Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and we might treasure and be inspired by reflections of enlightenment such as buddha images, but they cannot provide the kindness, guidance, and encouragement that nurture our aspirations. It's the living guide who connects us to the heart of dharma.

Part Two

The Four Common Foundation Practices

4. The First Thought That Turns the Mind

PRECIOUS HUMAN EXISTENCE

We now begin a more detailed discussion of the four thoughts that turn the mind. These contemplations, which make up the first part of ngondro, and which are called the "common" or "outer" ngondro, start with contemplating our precious human existence.

What makes our birth so precious is our potential for awakening. We are born buddhas, and all dharma practices help us recognize and nurture this truth. Because we do not actually believe in our own capacity for awakening, these teachings work to reverse the tendency to see ourselves as insufficient.

One day when my father was addressing the nuns in his small room at Nagi Gompa, he said, "Every one of you has buddha nature." He was teaching from a raised box, which also served as his bed; this is standard for Tibetans who spend most of their days meditating and teaching. I was about eight and had joined the nuns, who sat on rugs or cushions on the floor. No matter what words he used, my father was always talking about the nature of mind and about how to connect with our own buddha nature, which he also called pure awareness.

I had heard my father say many times that we were all inherently buddha, that everyone was born with buddha nature, and that human birth provided the best opportunity to recognize this. I listened attentively enough, but I always assumed that I was too weak and anxious for this good news to include me. At that time I suffered from extreme

shyness and panic attacks. Fierce weather such as snowstorms, thunder, or lightning could cause so much panic that my throat felt like it was closing, my skin would become sweaty, and waves of nausea would make me dizzy. Given these experiences, I could not imagine that I had the same qualities as all the buddhas.

That morning, however, my father really emphasized that there were no exceptions. "Whether you believe this or not," he said, "there isn't the slightest difference between your true nature and the true nature of all the buddhas." For the first time, I told myself, "This must include me." Just the idea that I was essentially the same as all the buddhas gave me some confidence, and I thought that in the future I might be less weak and fearful.

Around this time my father introduced me to the teachings on precious human existence by asking, "How would it feel to be a dog? Or a cow? Would you have the freedom and time to meditate?" He asked me to consider the different circumstances that must come together for one to connect to dharma. "Each of us has everything that we need to become a buddha," my father would tell me, meaning to recognize the buddha that we already are. "We can see, we can hear, we can taste and touch, we have the capacity for boundless kindness, and we have the fortunate circumstances to be born in a place and time where dharma exists. Everything is here, so we start by recognizing and appreciating all these wonderful circumstances that are part of our life already."

Since I was born into a loving family of dedicated dharma practitioners, this lesson should have been easy. Yet every time I sat down with the intention of appreciating my basic goodness, all I could think about were my panic attacks, my wild mind, and my physical frailty. Feeling like a failure, I asked my father to explain what I was doing wrong.

"It's a good sign to find your negative qualities first," he told me. "Often they are embedded so deeply—like a splinter that disappears under the skin—that we do not even see them. To separate ourselves from negative qualities, we need to see them first."

To explain how this works, my father used the image of dried cow dung. In India and Nepal, cow dung is commonly used for fuel. Moist

dung is made into flat patties and placed onto the walls of mud huts to dry. "If you put cow dung on a mud wall, when it dries it becomes part of the wall," my father explained. "Then when you try to wash away the pieces that stick, what happens? At first the wall appears dirtier than before and smells worse. But if you keep adding water, the dung will eventually separate from the wall, and the wall will become clean.

"When we first start to examine our mind, we might only see things that we do not like about ourselves, and it may feel like our negative qualities are actually increasing. This is quite natural. Eventually we see these negativities as just one small part of who we are. Underneath lies our buddha nature, our pure awareness, and nothing can wash that away, ever. However hidden our buddha nature might be, it's always with us."

Generally we identify so thoroughly with our emotional patterns and habitual thoughts that we come to think of them as "me." Our potential constricts around a limited definition of ourselves. We confine ourselves to fixed thoughts of "This is who I am." We aren't satisfied with our life, yet we suppress our capacity for change. To move beyond these self-imposed limits, we need to let go of our habitual ways of taking our human qualities and circumstances for granted.

Slowly I learned to trust that there was more to me than a bundle of things that I did not like. I began to think that perhaps enlightenment really was possible, even for me. Recognizing this potential—and gaining confidence in our ability to take advantage of it—is the core of the first thought that turns the mind toward liberation.

The Eight Freedoms and Ten Endowments

The teachings on precious human existence divide into eighteen distinct contemplations: the eight freedoms and the ten endowments—also called the ten riches. Each contemplation offers a distinct approach to shaking us out of our self-imposed habits, and each provides a fresh examination of qualities that already exist within us.

The Eight Freedoms

The eight freedoms refer to restrictive circumstances that we might have been born into—but thankfully we were born free from these restrictions, free from circumstances and conditions that place dharma wisdom beyond our reach.

The first four contemplations extol the benefits of being born human by considering the eternal suffering of beings in other realms. We might imagine ourselves as a cow, and then realize our good fortune to be born free from those mental and physical circumstances that restrict a cow's life. We might imagine a cow standing in its own excrement, puzzled—or perhaps terrified—by the smells and sounds of a slaughterhouse. These are severe, almost insurmountable, conditions for connecting to buddhahood. We use imagination and meditation to know the qualities of a cow's life in order to experience a heartfelt appreciation for the extraordinary advantages provided by our own human birth.

In working with the eight freedoms, we compare the advantages of being born in the human realm to the disadvantages of being born in the four non-human realms: the hell, hungry ghost, animal, and god realms. Then we imagine four circumstances within the human realm that restrict the potential for awakening, and appreciate that we were born free of these restrictions: we were not born in a land of religious intolerance; or in a land dominated by ignorant views; or in a land where a buddha did not appear. And we were born free from mental or physical disabilities that might severely restrict our capacity for awakening. But in order to continue with the eight freedoms, first we need to clarify this concept of realms.

The Six Realms of Samsaric Existence

In Tibetan Buddhism, we map out six realms to investigate the main mental afflictions that bind us to samsara. The six realms of samsaric existence are divided into the three lower and three higher realms. The three lower realms are the hell, hungry ghost, and animal realms. The three higher are the human, demigod, and god realms.

The first three—the hell, hungry ghost, and animal realms—correspond to anger, greed, and ignorance; the order suggests the levels of physical or emotional distress experienced in each. For example, the animal realm embodies the mental state of ignorance. Animals have wonderful qualities, but lack the capacity to reflect on their situation and to find a way out of hope and fear, or find release from living as prey or predator. Although animals have buddha nature just as we do, their circumstances inhibit their ability to recognize it.

Of course we humans have ignorance, too. It's the main obstacle to recognizing our inherent buddha qualities. But unlike animals, we are not defined by delusion and ignorance. For example, parents allow children to eat foods with high sugar contents, even as diabetes reaches epidemic proportions. As humans, we are endowed with the intelligence to make better choices. Even though the habits of desire might keep us eating too much sugar, our capacity to overcome destructive patterns exists nonetheless. Another example concerns the environment: in many areas of the world bathing and drinking water is poisoned by chemical and even human waste. There is nothing intelligent about this, yet recognizing positive alternatives exists within our power. We are not inherently bound to our unhealthy habits with regard to body and mind. We have the potential to wake up to the pure awareness that ignorance obscures. The afflictive states that characterize the realms are called *kleshas,* or defilements, because they defile our capacity to recognize our original wisdom.

The Lower Realms: Animal, Hungry Ghost, and Hell Realms

Most often teachings on the six realms start with the lowest and work up. But of all the nonhuman realms, the animal one is the easiest for us to relate to. Let's start by taking a moment to remember an experience of getting caught in the basic impulses of our animal nature. Are there any recent instances when you craved a particular food, or experienced a primal desire for sex, or felt the fight-or-flight response to a stressful situation? Can you connect with the force of this longing? Animals live

their entire lives driven by instinct and self-preservation. Many humans live in a similar state, inhibiting their capacity to know their true selves. The main point of exploring the nonhuman realms is to rejoice that we are not imprisoned by our afflictions, and to make sure that we don't misuse our opportunity for awakening.

The hungry ghost realm is inhabited by emaciated beings with bloated bellies and long skinny necks that can only swallow one drop of water at a time. These creatures, also called *pretas,* are condemned to be tortured by insatiable hunger and thirst.

What are we really talking about here? Greed. As a state of mind, greed cannot be satisfied, leaving us always grasping and desperate. Human beings know this realm intimately. With the global financial crisis of 2008, we witnessed the effects of minds so driven by greed and so restricted by selfishness that they became incapable of imagining the suffering that would surely result from their actions. When people are preoccupied with how much money they can amass each day by any means possible, including illegal and unethical actions, they are too consumed by the force of their insatiable need to benefit from dharma.

Hungry ghosts remain in this realm forever; some humans spend much of their time in this state. However, no human is destined to remain there. The point is to understand how these mental states create obstacles to liberation—but also to understand that human beings are not imprisoned by them. We move in and out of different afflictive states of samsaric existence, but being born human gives us the key to free ourselves from our self-constructed prisons and to liberate ourselves from samsara altogether.

In the Tibetan map of the mind, hell describes the "lowest" realm, meaning it is the afflictive state with the most intense suffering. Hell beings are tortured by anger and aggression. Consider the term *blind rage.* Think of the last time you experienced an anger so hot that you became blind to any idea of what caused that feeling or what sane action might alleviate it. To have your mind totally gripped by anger causes a state of blindness to anger's destructive effect on others and on yourself, and to any exits from this affliction.

In addition to the affliction of aggression, hell beings are tortured by

their environment, which ranges from extreme heat to unimaginable cold. These conditions make hell beings trapped in their immediate misery. Imagine a moment of excruciating physical pain such as that caused by a pinched nerve, an infected tooth, or a muscle spasm; or imagine being the victim of torture. Now imagine enduring that agony from your first breath until your last. In these circumstances, the aspiration to recognize your buddha nature cannot come forth.

Please understand that "hell," as well as every other realm, is not a location but a confused projection of the mind. External forces do not account for these mental states. The location of hell does not just confuse Westerners. Tibetans may also mistake these realms for external locations. That's why Saljay Rinpoche used to tell me, "Everything is a manifestation of mind. There's no hell 'out there.'"

Since these realms describe human afflictions, it might be helpful to think about how the mind manifests various realms, rather than thinking that we were born into them. If we mistakenly think we were born into them, then we might consider this a destiny with no exit. But it doesn't work that way. Freedom means not being dominated by anger, greed, ignorance, and other destructive emotions. Humans consumed by hatred live in a realm that we call "hell" because there is no escape, and therefore no access to dharma, no possibility for awakening. Extreme states of mental affliction do not allow us to step back and watch what is happening. When we become identified with our negativity, we fall into the river and get swept away by the current.

These contemplations help develop the confidence that we can learn to step away from compulsion and are no longer tyrannized by the kleshas. We can make choices. Then we can access our original wisdom and nurture awareness. Therefore the suffering that most arouses our compassion is the absence of any opportunity for these beings to recognize their own enlightened qualities.

The Upper Realms: Human, Demigod, and God Realms

The human, the demigod, and god realms comprise the three higher realms of samsara. In the human realm, the main causes of suffering

are craving, desire, and attachment. Attachment does not just refer to external phenomena such as houses, food, money, and partners. Our attachment becomes most intense around ideas that we hold about ourselves. We become attached to our ego, to our false sense of a contrived, fabricated persona that we cherish and protect. We put ourselves first and try to satisfy the demands made by our ideas of who we are and what we need.

The good news about the human realm is that it provides just enough suffering to cross over from samsara to nirvana. Not too much and not too little. Suffering so thoroughly oppresses beings in the lower realms that the possibility of liberation cannot arise. Our suffering does not overwhelm our longing for freedom, and our fleeting moments of happiness confirm that suffering is not fixed; suffering too is impermanent and changeable. Suffering and happiness together create the perfect conditions for awakening. Isn't this wonderful?

The realms inhabited by demigods and gods display the afflictions of jealousy and pride. (The demigod and god realms are often presented as two separate realms, but for ngondro we classify them as one realm.) The seductions of luxury and leisure overwhelm the aspiration to wake up. Think of all the time, money, and energy some people spend on pleasure and on fulfilling sense desires—the finest food, the perfect couch, the best car, the ultimate hot tub, the ideal island vacation. They wrap their lives in material objects, creating a facade of false security and satisfaction, and all the while they are setting themselves up to be devastated by life's inevitable fluctuations, and they remain unprepared for changing financial or social status, losing loved ones, growing old, failing health, and dying.

Meditators who indulge in this realm may spend more time arranging the beautiful images on their shrines than working with their minds. Or the seduction of comfort may be so strong that they practice while lying down on the couch. You know what the problem with this is? It's harder to practice this way. The mind that indulges its taste for luxury and sense pleasures distances itself from the practice of awareness. Sitting up and putting some backbone into your efforts actually

helps the mind to let go of its habitual traps, whether they are sensory indulgences, blind anger, or greed.

God-realm beings tend to use meditation as another way to pursue bliss, or to purposely create delightful experiences like flying to an island resort. Meditation becomes another way of seeking pleasure, rather than a method for clearly seeing the nature of mind and for experiencing things just as they are. Eventually such misguided strategies for happiness return these beings to the lower states of suffering.

My father always emphasized that the human realm offered the best opportunity for awakening. But when I was a child, the god realms still seemed so enticing: luxurious palaces filled with delicious food, fantastic parties, great music. Then my father would explain that the complete satisfaction of the sense desires creates a degree of drunkenness that makes god-realm beings a little stupid. A drowsy kind of complacency guarantees a very long existence here. My father would say, "God-realm beings live without wisdom." And just from his tone, I understood that living without wisdom was the saddest state of all.

Practicing with the Eight Freedoms

Because buddha nature is inherent to every being, no absolute obstacles to liberation exist. But not all beings have the opportunity to awaken in their present circumstances. Many beings contend with mental, physical, and emotional states that place powerful barricades on the dharma path. Every being encounters difficulties and obstacles. But having been born human means that we have the capacity not to be defined or defeated by them.

When we practice with the eight freedoms, we exchange ourselves with the beings in each of the states that restrict the capacity for liberation. We imagine that we exist as a hell being, a hungry ghost, an animal, or an inhabitant of the god realm. We embody the being; we don't merely observe it from the outside as if watching television.

You don't have to practice the eight freedoms in order. If exchanging yourself with beings in the hell or hungry ghost realms is too depressing

or sad, then skip ahead to the animal or god realms, and return to the more difficult ones later. I suggest starting with the easiest, which is probably the animal realm. Pick an animal that you know, like a cow or a dog.

Guided Cow Meditation

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Your eyes can be open or closed.
- Rest in open awareness for a minute or two.
- Bring to mind the image of the cow.
- Rest there. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the image of the cow.
- Now become the cow. You have four legs and a long tail. Imagine making the sound a cow makes ("Mooooooooo") and imagine that you're munching on grass.
- Now use four aspects to contemplate this cow's life:

  Body: What is the body of this cow like? Imagine how it feels to actually be this cow. Inhabit this cow. Be specific.

  Life Span: Consider the short life span of cows. Appreciate the length of your life and the opportunities that it provides for waking up!

  Circumstance: Where does this cow spend its days and nights? Where does it eat? In a dirty barn or in the hot sun, perhaps covered with dung and flies?

  Suffering: How does the cow live and what is it used for? Is it raised for its milk or for its flesh? Maybe it has a ring through its nostrils, or maybe it gets whipped, or maybe it works in hot fields. Maybe it's raised in a factory lot so overcrowded that it cannot move, or maybe it's pumped full of chemicals to make it grow fast and fat for the market. Feel this in your own body as much as possible, using the sensations to support meditative awareness.
- Next recognize how limited your life would be if you were a cow. You wouldn't have any ability to choose your own path in life, much less uproot the causes of suffering.
- Now, contemplate and appreciate your good fortune to have been

born a human, with a reality far different from a cow's. You can move back and forth between being the cow, and appreciation of your good fortune in being human.

- If you get distracted or tired, rest for some moments in open awareness before returning to the cow meditation.
- Try this for five or ten minutes.
- Conclude with resting in open awareness.

Normal and Meditative Awareness

Resting your mind on a cow is different than daydreaming about cows. This is awareness meditation. Usually when we think of something, we do not start with the intention to do so. Thoughts follow one another so quickly that we don't even know what's happening. Moreover, we become identified with our thoughts. We get so absorbed by what we think and feel that we believe that's who we are. Here the intention to cultivate awareness allows us to know that we are thinking while we are thinking. Since we purposely imagine the cow, we cultivate recognizing mental activity in the moment and not losing ourselves in thoughts. With awareness, we know that we are meditating.

Try to get in touch with the difference between normal and meditative awareness. The transformative ingredient is the recognition of awareness as we think about this cow, the fact that we know we are thinking even as we are thinking. We begin by setting the intention to recognize awareness.

When we do analytical meditation like this, it's very helpful to alternate periods of contemplation with periods of resting meditation. When we imagine being a cow, after a while our mind might become bored and restless, and we might think, "Enough of this cow!" If this happens, let go and rest. Drop the visualization, but stay with the awareness. Rest and release a deep exhale: Aaahhh. That's how we rest, how we practice open awareness. No more cow.

Let's say that we are meditating and we become so absorbed in thoughts that we lose track of what's happening. At that moment, we

shake ourselves awake. We come back. In that very moment, we experience awareness. This is nondistraction, nonmeditation, a sense of not being lost. First we acknowledge, "Oh I am lost." Then we think, "Now I have to meditate." But that comes afterward. In between there's a gap, a moment of undistracted awareness. We know where we are and what we are doing, but we are not trying to control the mind or do anything special. We are completely at ease with whatever is happening around us. This is resting with nonmeditation.

We might want to drop the meditation when we get sick of it or when it becomes stale, but we also might want to drop it when we experience an actual shift in feeling. In this case, for example, it's easy enough to intellectually appreciate the advantages that humans have over cows, but when this shifts from theoretical knowledge to an experiential feeling, then let go of the meditation and just rest in that feeling. Aaahhh. We rest in effortless nonmeditation, not worrying about what is happening or not happening, yet not lost either.

If the mind becomes restless again and discursive chatter begins to take over, then return to the cow meditation. This takes a little discipline and effort. If you stray off course and return to the cow meditation twenty times in one minute, no problem. Training the mind not to wander takes practice.

When you emerge from cow meditation, appreciate the differences between the cow's life and your own. Think about those differences. End the session by sitting quietly, just staying with awareness. The entire exercise might take five to ten minutes.

The Four Restrictive Conditions of the Human Realm

After contemplating the four nonhuman realms—the hell, hungry ghost, animal, and god realms—the first thought continues with four human circumstances that restrict the capacity for awakening.

First, we appreciate that we were not born in a "borderland," a term that derives from the time when certain areas that bordered Buddhist countries were not Buddhist or were hostile to dharma. Today we might

consider countries or societies that criticize or condemn religions not their own, or which try to suppress religious institutions that do not support the political regime. Or consider conflicts between Christians in Ireland, or between Buddhists and Tamils in Sri Lanka, or sectarian aggression between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims—and appreciate the freedom that you have to follow a religious path of your choice.

Second, we appreciate that our aspirations have not been restricted by being born in an area dominated by "wrong views." This refers to situations where the prevailing beliefs make it difficult—if not impossible—to benefit from dharma. Mistaken beliefs might include believing that harming others brings virtue, or accepting that profit justifies slavery or slaughter, or denying truths that lie beyond our personal comprehension, such as the inseparability of form and emptiness.

Third, we imagine a realm where a buddha has not even appeared. Those times in human history devoid of a fully awakened teacher are called the dark ages. If we had been born at such times, we would not even hear about dharma, much less have supportive circumstances to realize its value. But this is not the case, so we rejoice in our good fortune!

The fourth and last of the restrictive states refers to being born free of incapacitating physical or mental dysfunctions. Disabilities do not necessarily make dharma practice impossible, but they may make it more difficult. If we are free of these problems, then we should rejoice in the benefits of a sound body and mind rather than taking them for granted. This contemplation provides an occasion to acknowledge the inherent gifts of our human existence and to consider their role in our efforts to wake up—that we can hear the dharma, read the texts, travel to take teachings, or go on pilgrimage to sacred sites.

Daily Practice

Try to imagine each of the eight freedoms as part of a daily practice, just as you did with the cow. At first it may take up to ten minutes for each exercise, but with familiarity, a minute or two for each realm should suffice.

As you move through each situation, inhabit the suffering experienced by different beings. It's quite natural for feelings of compassion to spontaneously emerge, and these exercises might bring tears. You don't have to push compassionate feelings away, but keep the emphasis on staying aware, on knowing what is happening while it is happening.

We exchange ourselves with other beings in order to recognize that we have what it takes to bring an end to suffering. That's our main purpose. In addition, this contemplation offers an important side benefit. The two biggest obstacles to meditation are dullness and agitation, which can be offset by working with living beings. When we try to tame the mind, the mind often responds by becoming either uncommonly dull or fuzzy, or agitated and speedy. With dullness, the mind closes down before we can work with it, and we lose track of our intentions. This leads to drowsiness and often to falling asleep. With agitation, the mind buzzes around like a drunken bee and cannot settle. Often, trying to bring the awareness to the breath, or to an object such as a flame or a flower, simply doesn't compel the mind enough to offset dullness and agitation. Meditation exercises on living beings, however, particularly when they involve suffering or impermanence, help steady the mind and keep it actively engaged, making the mind less subject to dullness and agitation. Of course, our mind will still wander. That's a very natural function of the mind. Just keep coming back to awareness.

Building a Solid Foundation

Before moving on to the ten endowments, I want to bring your attention to how the practice of precious human existence builds a solid foundation for the entire ngondro path.

To begin with, contemplation itself engages us with the recognition of awareness. When we exchange ourselves with beings in other realms, we begin to discover that loving-kindness and compassion are with us all the time. We just need to know how to nurture those inherent qualities. Allowing daydreams and fantasies to rule our life can put us so out of touch with reality that we quickly believe our made-up versions. Generally our thoughts exert tremendous power over us. With these

contemplations, we learn to harness the power of imagination in order to dismantle those emotional patterns that keep us spinning in samsara.

We are all pretty attached to our identifications, and we can become completely stuck inside the various boxes that we create for our own cherished labels: "I am a man, I am a Tibetan, I am a Buddhist," and so forth. Hundreds of labels like these forge rigid identities. But once we imagine ourselves to be an animal, our solid sense of self may loosen. Our box now includes being a cow. How remarkable!

Once we begin to loosen our imprisoning ideas about who we are, we can experiment with new forms, shapes, and identities. If we continue on our dharma path, this newfound flexibility allows us to see more of the awareness, wisdom, and compassion that manifest all the time, in others and ourselves. And if we can become a cow, perhaps we can become a buddha.

The way we use imagination starts simply, but gradually the practices become more complex. We begin by imagining an animal outside ourselves, then we become the animal. Later on, we imagine a buddha outside ourselves, but by the end of ngondro we become a buddha. We start modestly, but once we begin to expand the definitions of who we are and who we can become, anything is possible. Eventually all our rigid notions fall away, and we realize that we don't become buddhas: we already are buddhas.

When we bring imagination into the spiritual journey, it becomes a way to let go of our small-box definitions and magnify the scope of possibilities. Instead of trying to control the mind and force it to stop doing what it does naturally, we use its creative energy. We let all the words, images, and story lines that occupy us serve a constructive purpose.

What allows the mind to change and restructure its content moment after moment? What allows for so much mutability? To answer this question, you might ask yourself whether there is an essential "me" or "self" that defines you. If you think there is, try to find it. Is there some basis for all the ideas that you have about yourself? Or might your sense of identity only exist as a concept? When you let go of all your ideas about the way things are, and even of your beliefs about yourself, what are you left with? What do you see in your direct, naked experience?

One time at Tergar Monastery in Bodh Gaya, India, a student pointed out that the wooden box in front of my chair could be viewed as a table, a casket, a chest, or a throne, depending on context and usage. The point is that imagination gives rise to experience, even though we generally assume that our experiences arise from objective reality independent of how we think about it. The power of imagination can be a fantastic asset on the spiritual path, but it can also be a big headache. So really, we have a choice between using it to benefit ourselves and others, or being tyrannized by it.

This practice raises many interesting questions: What makes it possible to imagine ourselves as other beings? What does our capacity to exchange ourselves with others tell us about ourselves? If the beliefs we have about the world and ourselves are nothing more than ideas, then who and what are we? These are the very questions that hint at the absolute truth of emptiness, the ultimate reality that allows us to liberate ourselves from fixed and fabricated identities. Many opportunities to discuss this lie ahead, but for now just hold these questions in a creative and playful way.

The ten endowments, or ten riches, describe our inherent opportunities for waking up: to be born human; to be born in a central land; to be born with our senses intact; to be born free from socially fixed situations; to be born with devotion to dharma; to be born where a buddha has appeared; to be born in a world where a buddha has taught the dharma; to be born in a world with the endowment of lineage; to be born in a world with the endowment of sangha; to be born in a world with the kindness of teachers.

The Ten Endowments

The ten endowments, or ten riches, reverse the restrictive states and emphasize human circumstances favorable for liberation.

The first is the fact of human birth—the primary condition for awakening. Even though we may not take advantage of this ability to its fullest, it's still remarkable that we have the potential to explore our own consciousness, to learn how the mind works, to experience our internal

buddha directly, and to know our true nature beyond ego, personality, and ideas about selfhood.

The next endowment refers to a "central land," meaning a place where the opportunity to encounter the dharma exists. It also refers to Bodh Gaya, the site of Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment located in the center of India. It may also mean the immediate physical environment of our upbringing or school, or whatever circumstances allowed us to connect with dharma. Don't interpret these endowments too literally. The important point is to acknowledge and appreciate that we were born in a time and place where we have access to dharma.

For the third endowment, we appreciate being born with our senses intact. Fortunately in this age, books in Braille exist for the blind, and sign language exists for the deaf. Impairments that might have made practicing the dharma impossible no longer overwhelm innate potential. But some cases still arise where the senses are too deficient to practice. So we should rejoice in the fact that our eyes allow us to read words of wisdom, our ears can hear the living words of dharma, and so forth.

Next is being born "free from socially fixed situations." This refers to livelihoods that create suffering for oneself and others, and in particular to the days when caste and class determined our place in the world. In many areas of the world today, social systems are not so fixed. Yet the need for employment, the limited availability of work, and the conventional acceptance of destroying the environment for profit, or working in the war industry or meat industry, mean that cultures still sanction livelihoods that contribute to suffering. In contemplating this endowment, we acknowledge our options and appreciate that we can choose a livelihood that does not add more suffering to the world.

Fifth, we consider the good fortune to be born with devotion to dharma. If we do not feel this way, that's OK. We have the potential for devotion to dharma, the potential to have concern for sentient beings, and we recognize the possibility of awakening.

The next five endowments describe those circumstances that make our connection to dharma possible. First, the Buddha appeared in this world. Second, not only did the Buddha appear, but he also taught the

dharma. If the Buddha had appeared but not taught, that would not have helped us much. This almost happened: After Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, his initial response was, "No one will ever believe what just happened to me, what I learned, what I recognized. There is no point in trying to communicate any of this. Nobody will get it." But then—according to legend—Brahma and Vishnu interceded and begged the Buddha to teach.

Third, not only did the Buddha appear and teach, but we are also blessed with the "endowment of lineage." Without lineage, his teachings might have been lost. Many religions in world history have come and gone. Dynasties and royal lineages have disappeared. Yet for two thousand six hundred years, we have had an unbroken lineage that dates back to Shakyamuni Buddha. Appreciate how remarkable this is!

Fourth, we appreciate the "endowment of sangha." The Buddha could have appeared and taught, yet his teachings might only exist as cultural artifacts in museums with no living, present link to their origins. The fact that the wisdom of Shakyamuni Buddha continues to be transmitted, taught, practiced, and experienced is a great blessing that should not be taken for granted!

The last endowment that creates favorable circumstances for our connection to dharma is the kindness of the teacher. We appreciate that we were born in a land with kind dharma teachers. In my own case, it is 100 percent clear to me that I could not have found relief from my fears and panic attacks on my own. It was only with the help of my teachers that I was able to watch the display of my neurotic habits without getting swept away by them. The relief that this brought was like living in a world different from the one I had previously inhabited. I could never have done that on my own. The kindness of my teachers became a deeply felt experience, not just an idea about how enlightened people were supposed to act.

The Rarity of Being Born Human

Now that we have cultivated an ardent thankfulness for our human existence, we must take a good look around us and accept that this

condition is impermanent and rare, and may not come around again. As Shantideva said:

> So hard to find such ease and wealth
> Whereby to render meaningful this human birth!
> If I now fail to turn it to my profit,
> How could such a chance be mine again?

When my father first explained the exceptional aspect of human birth, I asked, "If humans are such a rare breed, how come Kathmandu is so crowded that you cannot even squeeze past all the people?"

My father answered with a story about a Tibetan businessman who went back and forth between Tibet and India. In Tibet, he heard teachings about precious human existence and how humans were much rarer than other beings. Sometime later, the man returned to the teacher and asked, "Have you ever been to Kolkata?"

The teacher told him, "No."

"Ah, now I know why you think being born human is so rare," the man said. "Kolkata is so jammed with people that you can hardly walk down the street. The vast, empty land of Tibet with a little village here, another over the mountains there, has you convinced that being born human is exceptional. But I can promise you that it is not."

Then the teacher told him, "Go into the forest with a shovel and dig up a piece of earth, maybe four-by-four feet, and see if you can stay there long enough to count all the creatures that live there."

One anthill might contain more beings than a small city. Most beings live in the ocean; an international study has identified two hundred thousand marine species, and the study is not finished. Tibetans say that if you repeatedly throw a handful of uncooked rice across the room, the chances of one grain sticking to the wall is greater than being born human.

According to Buddhist understanding, being born human results from virtuous actions in our past lives. Take a moment to think about how rare it is in today's world to work for the welfare of others, or to practice patience in the face of aggression, or to give money or food

during tough economic times. When compared with all the actions motivated by self-interest and aggression, those that arise from altruism and sacrifice are few and far between. This relates to karma, which is the third thought that turns the mind toward dharma. We will discuss this in detail later. For the moment, just appreciate that you were born in this rare form and that this did not happen by chance. Appreciate that much, and don't worry about anything else.

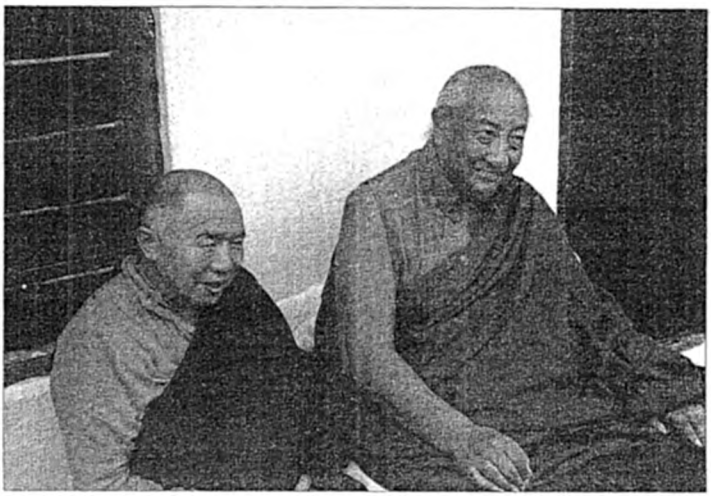
Support for Our Practice

I have a friend who complained that her area of British Columbia did not support dharma studies. "It's very isolating to practice in the West," she told me. "Our families wish we were studying medicine or some reputable profession. Even if the dharma has inspired us to spend a life helping others, our commitments are not valued. It's not like Tibet, where dharma was treasured."

"Everyone practicing dharma is working through his or her own particular difficulties," I told her. "Otherwise, why practice? And everyone needs encouragement. All the bodhisattvas—those who vow to work for the liberation of all beings—and teachers faced obstacles and discouragement, and had problems with their families. Think of Shakyamuni Buddha. Think of Naropa. Think of Milarepa. What made these teachers great was not the absence of obstacles, but that they took advantage of those very obstacles to wake up to their own buddhahood. Look at modern masters. Look at Khyentse Rinpoche."

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche [1910–1991] was one of the greatest masters of Tibetan Buddhism in the last century, a true dharma king. From the time he was a small boy, he only wished to study dharma. His parents were devout Buddhists, but his older brother had already been recognized as a tulku, and their parents refused to lose another son to the monasteries. Throughout Khyentse Rinpoche's earliest years, every great lama who met him agreed that he had special qualities, but his parents refused to allow him to ordain.

Then one summer, things changed. His father employed many laborers to help harvest the crops. In order to feed all the workers, enormous



Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (right) with Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche at Nagi Gompa, 1985.

vats of soup were set into fire pits. One day when Khyentse Rinpoche was about ten years old, he was outside playing with his brother and he fell into a vat of boiling soup. His body was so badly burned that he could not move from his bed. The family gathered around every day to recite long-life prayers, but he remained close to death for many months.

One day his father said to him, "I will do anything to save your life. Is there anything that you can think of, any ceremonies or prayers, which might make you better?"

Immediately Khyentse Rinpoche told his father, "It might be very helpful if I could wear monk's robes."

Of course his father complied, and once the robes were gently laid over his burns, he recovered very quickly.

Another of the greatest Buddhist masters, Atisha [982–1054], also had family problems. Like Shakyamuni Buddha, he was born into a royal family; his father wanted him to inherit the throne and tried to lure him away from spiritual pursuits. Naropa had a similar story. All he wanted was to follow a spiritual path, but his parents made him marry—which did not work out too well.

It is natural for us to be inspired by the highest attainments of the great masters. But identifying with their struggles and family problems can inspire us, too. Once we see that they dealt with obstacles and problems just like we do, then we can relate to their discipline, perseverance, dedication—qualities that must be cultivated in order to renounce the world of confusion.

We are not alone with our struggles. The lineage holders and the practices support us. By contemplating our precious human life, we gain confidence that we too can do this. Understanding that we have everything we need for our journey might really inspire us not to waste our inherent treasures. We have planted some very potent seeds, and a little success with our efforts will definitely change our sense of ourselves. We might be able to expand our definitions and explore a wider range of possibilities. We might surprise ourselves by asking our employers for a vacation or a raise, which we had previously thought we did not deserve. Maybe we'll accept an invitation for an activity that used to scare us, such as public speaking, airplane travel, or karaoke singing.

Most importantly, we might come to see that enlightenment isn't just a distant possibility, but our very nature. We can no more be without it than fire can be without heat. But we can only wake up when we realize that enlightenment only happens in the present moment. By contemplating precious human birth, we recognize that we'll never have a better opportunity than the one we have right now.

5. The Second Thought That Turns the Mind

IMPERMANENCE

During the summer months my mother did not enjoy the heat of the Kathmandu valley, so she and I returned to Nubri, where I was born, to live with her parents. The village sits just on the southern side of the Nepal-Tibet border. One of the Tibetan temples in Nubri has a picture of the charnel grounds with birds feasting on the corpses of dead animals and human bodies. When I first saw this painting with my grandmother, I asked her, "What is that?"

"That is death," she told me.

"What happens at death?" I asked.

She said, "Your body is left behind, and only your mind goes."

"Where does your mind go?"

"Ask your grandfather," she answered a little sternly.

My mother's father is still alive and is a great, highly realized meditator. I used to love to sit in the shrine room while he was meditating, but I was too shy to ask him about death.

Soon enough, I had an encounter with impermanence when a cow herder who lived with my grandparents became sick. In Nubri we had several dozen cows, yaks, and *dzo* (a cross between a yak and a cow). Two caretakers helped my grandmother look after the animals and the fields. They also turned the extra milk into butter and cheese, which we sold to traders from Kathmandu. One herder was especially kind, making time to play with me and taking me to the distant pastures to locate our animals. My family lived in the middle of three attached

Mingyur Rinpoche on the back of his maternal grandmother in front of their house in Nubri, Nepal, circa 1976.

houses, and this man's room was on the second floor of an adjoining house. In the evenings my grandmother cooked dinner for all of us, but this man never showed up on time. When he finally arrived, my grandmother always scolded him. They really loved each other, but were always squabbling.

One day this man became sick. I was about seven, and he must have been fifty. He could not work in the fields or care for the animals, and began spending more time in his room. During this period my grandmother was very good to him, cooking his favorite meals and carrying them to his room. Sometimes I brought his meals and would find him lying on his bed. I would sit next to him and he would say things like, "I am getting better. But today I am having trouble walking."

Then I would say, "You are really getting better, and soon you will be fine."

A few months later, he died. I cried for weeks, not every day, but on and off. I missed his presence, his affection and humor. He was part of

my Nubri family and it had never occurred to me that his illness was taking him away from us, nor did I have a clue that life might be fleeting for all beings. Yet people I knew kept dying.

In the autumn, before the snow blocked the passes between Nubri and Kathmandu, my mother and I returned to Nagi Gompa. One evening my attendant and I and a few nuns were sitting around outside chatting casually when one nun asked my father to pray for someone who had died. In his prayers, my father used a Tibetan expression about the upper and lower valleys, meaning that a death in one valley carries the message or reminder to the people in the next valley that we are all going to die sooner or later. Nothing lasts forever in samsara.

In a vague way, it began to seep into my mind that if I didn't understand impermanence, I would always be hoping for relationships, situations, and even my own body and mind to provide some sense of stability, when in fact they are changing all the time. I started to see that seeking for stability where it does not exist keeps the mind in a constant state of grasping and anguish.

Contemplating Impermanence

Contemplating impermanence naturally leads to thoughts of death. In the ngondro liturgy it says, "The world and those within it are impermanent. Soon I too will die." Fear of death is pervasive, and the grasping onto our existence, even as our body fades, provides abundant material for practice. We can all connect to this feeling. Meditating on death and dying can uproot the most forceful grasping. If meditating on death is done in a genuine and diligent manner, it will definitely affect how we live.

Once we accept our own impermanence, we aspire not to waste time on meaningless activities or on behaviors that create more dissatisfaction. The truth of impermanence really amplifies our wish to be free. We aspire to take advantage of our rare circumstances before we lose them. We don't want to find ourselves on our deathbeds confronting impermanence for the first time and regretting that we could have been better prepared. When our perception of impermanence remains steady, then

we can begin to close the gap between how we think things "should" be and how they actually are.

Let's suppose that our daily practice includes a meditation on death. One afternoon we arrive at the airport, and our flight has been canceled. If we become upset, something in our practice is not working quite right. Perhaps by focusing too tightly or narrowly on our own body, we missed our pervasive resistance to change. Perhaps we missed seeing how the mind fixates on what it wants, to the point where it cannot accept what is actually happening. We might think we're working with death and with accepting impermanence, but we cannot remain stable when our car dies or when moths eat our favorite sweater.

If meditating on death does not shift the way you relate to minor changes, choose a less intense situation and try to go into that more deeply. For example, recall the last days of someone who has already died, or work with someone who is sick now, or a sick pet, or a pet that has died. Not everyone can deal with his or her own death at first—or anyone else's—and that's fine.

In the sequence of ngondro, the first thought assures us that being born human provides the rare and precious opportunity for awakening. Following this, our contemplations on impermanence really inspire us to embrace the dharma, to not waste more time, and to set a direction that cultivates the contentment that we have always longed for.

When you have choices within the general outline—such as choosing an object to support a meditation on impermanence—it's your responsibility to select something reflective of your capacity, something not too easy or too difficult. If your own existence, or that of someone you love, evokes too much anxiety, that's not a problem.

Whatever object you choose, allow your mind to stay with the appearance of its solidity and permanence, and then hold that image as it transforms—like a log burning or a candle melting. You can even start with changes for the better, such as someone who had been sick and is now healthy; or imagine a blossom in springtime becoming an apple by autumn. Spring blossoms may intoxicate us with their loveliness, but we do not begrudge their transformation into fruit. Positive or neutral transitions can help stabilize the reality of change, but the

deeper benefit of this exercise comes from recognizing that grasping onto the illusion of permanence creates anguish and dissatisfaction.

We tend to associate impermanence with loss, not gain. Yet all the positive potential in our life can only be realized because of impermanence. At the beginning, the most important thing is to choose a workable object in order to become comfortable with the reality of change. But once again, our studies are not just about how reality works. They are about the end of suffering. The point of accepting the impermanence of all phenomena is that this is the sword of wisdom that cuts through endless layers of delusion and distortion.

Our modern world shows evidence of temples and universities, even entire cities, which crumbled to dust thousands of years ago, and of animals that are now extinct. In a hundred years, just about every living person will be dead. Forests, lakes, houses, economic and political systems, cars, languages, and ideas—everything changes. We easily accept impermanence as intellectual information. But in the Buddha's diagnosis, descriptive truth is not the point. To acknowledge the truth of impermanence while functioning as if things do not change perpetuates the sickness of suffering. This is why meditation is so important. Using impermanence as support for our recognition of awareness will actually shift how we relate to the continuity of change.

The difficulty is recognizing change and insubstantiality in what we perceive—not as a rational afterthought, but as a direct, present experience. Sometimes people resist the idea that the very nature of samsara is suffering, saying, "But I have known happiness, I have experienced joyful times." But inevitably the happy times changed because they depended on conditions and circumstances that predictably dissolved or disappeared. And what follows? When we hold a fixed idea of how things are supposed to be, then change is met with disappointment, despair, and longing. If we perceive change within the experience of happiness, however, we save ourselves a lot of anguish. This possibility exists with the mind of awareness. With awareness, we no longer try to hold our happy moments in place with the mind of fixation.

The Buddha saw that suffering arises in the mismatch between reality and subjective perception. We try to superimpose our view of what we

want onto what actually is, and this creates a lot of suffering. We are not talking about big-deal problems like warfare or terminal diseases, or tsunamis or earthquakes; nor are we talking about the acute anguish that comes with relationships ending, or losing a job, or our home burning down. We're talking about everyday events that can turn daily life into a series of upsets: our computer crashes, the car gets a flat tire, the cleaner ruins our shirt, our flight is canceled. Of course we expect our clothes to be returned cleaned, not ruined. We expect our computer to work. But when our mind becomes so attached to our expectations that we cannot accommodate any change, then life becomes unmanageable. At that point, our mind just jumps from annoyance to disappointment to moral outrage in one long whine of complaint.

Furthermore, an insignificant matter can ignite a chain of events that ends in catastrophe. Take, for example, a young woman so upset about her ruined shirt that she rushes from the cleaners in a blind rage. She may step into the road too preoccupied to hear the truck coming from behind and get splashed with mud. She left the cleaners with a mind conditioned by anger, and so she set herself up for more anger. Her distraction might even result in a fatal accident, such as being hit by a car. As a result, she might leave behind young children who now have no mother.

This is how samsara works, an endless cycle of suffering perpetuated by ignorance and unintended consequences. Big problems do not start big. Shamata meditation teaches us how to check ourselves before we act out little grievances that have the potential to become disasters.

Letting Go of Grasping

See if you can connect to grasping as the cause of discontent. You are grasping onto an idea or a fantasy of who you are or of what you want, and this grasping prevents you from relating to things as they are. The main point of this second thought is to accept the inevitable change from living to dying, and to inspire us to take full advantage of our human existence in the limited amount of time that we have. Yet as beginners, we need to work with the gut sensation of grasping, resistance, and fixation with regard to mundane aspects of our life before

we can see that these same tendencies condition how we experience our own existence. Once we begin to let go of grasping, we can become more accepting of reality, even the reality of our own impermanence.

When we grasp too tightly, we cannot see the big picture. We make mountains out of molehills and suffer the consequences, like the lady with the ruined shirt. Obviously it's an inconvenience to miss a flight, but it's not a catastrophe. When we grasp too tightly to our expectations and plans, we lose perspective. Everything becomes a big deal, and this overreaction can lead to destructive behavior.

The reverse of this tight attachment is being too loose. You might think, "Nothing matters, so why bother to do anything meaningful? There is so much grasping in relationships and friendships that they fall apart. I will not try. Sooner or later I will die, so what difference does anything make?" This view reflects the confused assumption that our grasping and habitual patterns are innate and unchangeable, and therefore any effort to liberate ourselves from them is hopeless. It also reflects ignorance of our basic goodness, and ignorance of the potential that each of us has to realize our true nature for the benefit of all beings, including ourselves. Understanding impermanence is not an invitation to depression and hopelessness; rather it nurtures our aspiration to wake up now and to pursue an authentic life. Seeing our fixations helps us manage the balance between rigid grasping and falling apart.

We can try so hard not to let go of our attachments that the effort to keep what we most want can destroy us. Perhaps you can think of someone—it may be yourself—who grasped so tightly to a beloved, or to money, or to power, that it caused physical harm such as a heart attack. My students told me about a famous rock-and-roll song by the Rolling Stones: "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." That's the predominant feeling of grasping, never being satisfied. These days in the modern world everybody wants more and more, and grows less and less satisfied with what they have.

Subtle and Gross Impermanence

We understand impermanence in terms of both subtle and gross manifestations. Gross refers to obvious, observable change: firewood turns

to ash, roofs collapse, the refrigerator breaks down, and we grow old and die. Subtle refers to the moment-by-moment changes that normally we do not notice or cannot see, but are nonetheless inherent in gross forms. Our wrinkles might suddenly surprise us, but they have been developing for years. The second-by-second transformation of a blossom into an apple represents subtle change. When the apple disappears into my mouth, that's gross impermanence.

Let's say that we are sipping a cup of tea, and the cup slips onto the floor. Crash! A cup suddenly transforms into ten pieces of baked clay. We call this gross impermanence. But of course, the unbroken cup was changing with each nanosecond. And we too change with each nanosecond. Because of our conventional understanding of past, present, and future, we experience a beginning and an end to phenomena. The crash put an end to the cup being a cup, even as it created shards of baked clay.

Nothing stays the same, even though the subtlety of change makes this hard to detect. The West has a good expression for this: You cannot step into the same river twice. Yet, if we go to the same river every day, we assume that today's river is the same as yesterday's, and will be the same as tomorrow's. But the river changes every day, every second, and every nanosecond. Conventional understanding suggests that impermanence relates to the ending of things, to the visible display of dissolution. But impermanence exists within every aspect of the universe. Just as we cannot separate water from ice, we cannot separate impermanence from phenomena.

We apply the descriptive concept of death to the ending of humans, as we know them, as well as to animals, cars, and trees. The conventional view uses the last breath to define the end of sentient beings, so we are conditioned not to see this moment in terms of change or transformation. We might say that our red convertible died, meaning that it stopped moving on the highway, although it might be revived, or sold as junk and melted down and made into another object. Boats sink, houses decay, pets die, fishing nets disintegrate. All of these descriptions are changes in form that imply an ending. But what we call an "ending" is simply a transformation—an ending to what we know, or want to hold on to, or can identify. "Ending" only applies to the concept, not the

object. The object just changes. The cup that crashed died as a cup. But it became something else. Everything that we can see and identify, and everything that we cannot see—it's all changing. Continuous change simply manifests the nature of ordinary reality.

Meditating on Impermanence and Death

My father had tried to explain that meditating on death developed wisdom and compassion and provided the best antidote for anger, suffering, grasping, and pain. This sounded like more bad news, and I was not convinced. That changed when I was twelve and the time came for the formal ceremony that acknowledged me as the reincarnation of the previous Mingyur Rinpoche. By then I was living at Sherab Ling, and hundreds of people gathered in the main temple for the ceremony. They came from Bir, from the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, from Nepal, and from the Tibetan monasteries in the area. Tai Situ Rinpoche conducted the ceremony from a throne facing the crowd, and I sat to one side; my brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche came from Tashi Jong Monastery and sat opposite me. I had been in a state of anxiety about this ceremony for weeks, and throughout the day he had stayed by my side reassuring me.

However, as I climbed onto the throne, my throat began to close and waves of dizziness hit me as turbulence hits an airplane. I became sweaty and nauseous and experienced the worst panic attack of my life. My brother was afraid that I would faint and kept motioning for me to sip water. As the ceremony came to an end, everyone passed before me to offer a *kata*—a white ceremonial scarf—and I had to bless each one. Finally the last person came through the line and the ceremony ended, but the panic continued. The entire gathering had been invited to a special lunch under a big outdoor tent, but I rushed to my room.

I lay down on my bed, but the nausea and dizziness continued for several days until I just figured that I would die. At that point, words that my father had spoken came back to me. I thought about impermanence and the benefits of including myself in the reality of change. Since I had already concluded that I would soon die, merely thinking

Mingyur Rinpoche's enthronement ceremony
at Sherab Ling Monastery in 1987.

about this possibility no longer scared me as it had in the past. I asked myself: If I die tomorrow, then what?

After a few more days, when the panic would not leave my body, I began to really imagine that the next day would be my last. I lay on my bed, just like the caretaker, and imagined my death. I asked myself, "If I die tomorrow, will I have regrets? If the last hours of my life are filled with regrets, what will they be? I am too young to regret not making a lot of money or not doing well in business," I thought. "I cannot regret not being famous or not becoming strong. I don't feel that I will regret being too arrogant or angry or grasping."

Then it dawned on me that I might regret that my life did not become meaningful, that I was at the very beginning of my own practice and was not going to live long enough to help people. With that, I saw my devotion to dharma and also that I had some tendency toward compassion.

The previous (sixth) Mingyur Rinpoche.

With this experience, I began to lose some of my intense aversion to the fear of dying. Before I always anticipated the fear of fear. The fear of being afraid would make me sweat with anxiety. With this experience, I began to separate fear of death from actually dying, which made the fear less frightening. After that I could use meditation on death to investigate impermanence. Also I was newly inspired to practice dharma. In earnest, I began to identify dharma as the only true source of lasting happiness. With this understanding, a lot of insignificant concerns began to drop away.

Turning away from samsara might be reflected by responses that we once considered normal, such as becoming exasperated in a long line, or becoming upset with the dry cleaners, or having a fit if our computer crashes, or getting angry if our plane has been delayed. Given a choice, who would want to engage in reactive behavior that manifests fixated

mind and is of no benefit to others or ourselves? Of course our habits are very strong and will not change overnight. But once our orientation shifts, once we turn our attention away from confusion and toward clarity, the seeds of awakening will begin to bear fruit.

Choose a Workable Object

For this contemplation, remember to choose something workable. Do you have any money in the stock market? If not, perhaps you know someone who lost money in a financial crisis. Consider using this sudden change in fortune as the object of a meditation. This would be a gross example of gross impermanence! But really, try to connect with the more subtle motivations that created a discrepancy between your expectations and what happened. Try to identify some of the ways your mind created problems through greed and grasping. If you imagine, "Oh, I was going to give all that money I lost to my dharma center or to my guru," then remember what Buddha Shakyamuni said: "A person who meditates on impermanence for a few seconds will accumulate more merit than one who gathers up all the jewels in the universe and offers them to my main disciples."

If you feel ready to think about your own death, then you might imagine yourself lying down at home or in the hospital, and thinking, "This is my last day in this world." See if you can feel dissolution experiences, such as weakened hearing or sight. Perhaps you can feel the out-breaths becoming longer, and the in-breaths becoming more shallow. You can ask, "What is my regret?"

Remember, you are beginning to turn your mind toward liberation. So for this exercise, don't bring forth memories that evoke regret and guilt, or conjure up your enemies. Instead, try to connect to your pure heart and think, "Gee, I wish I had done more for others." Aspiration generates feelings that you wish you had been more helpful, more generous, more compassionate. These aspirations can energize your efforts in the days ahead. This method of meditating on death is connected to gross impermanence.

At the end of the meditation you think, "I am still alive! I am not dead

yet, and now I can do these positive things." In this way, the practice develops joy. You might also want to notice what effect meditating on death has on your own arrogance. Perhaps some things make you feel superior to others or make you proud, such as your muscular body or your red convertible, your beautiful home or your awards and diplomas. What happens to these identifications of status when you imagine lying on your deathbed?

Guided Meditation on Impermanence

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Your eyes can be open or closed.
- Take a minute to rest in open awareness.
- Now choose an object that invites you to contemplate impermanence. You might choose your own body, or that of another person or a pet, or a house or a tree.
- As you examine this object, consider how it has already changed since its inception. Investigate how it changes from moment to moment.
- If you have chosen to contemplate your own impermanence, then consider asking:
  Aren't the years of my life slipping by?
  Isn't everything changing moment to moment?
  Has anyone ever lived forever?
  Isn't it possible for death to come without warning?
- If you become distracted, just pause, and then continue.
- From time to time, drop the contemplation and rest in open awareness.
- Try this for five to ten minutes.
- Conclude by resting in open awareness.

If you meditate on your own death, or on a parent or loved one who has a terminal illness, it's easy to get lost in the story. Keep coming back to awareness. Remember, recognition of awareness defines the difference between meditation and normal awareness. If you get carried away by the story, that's OK, but try to bring your mind back to awareness.

If repeated attempts to meditate on your own death or the death of a loved one bring on overwhelming emotional distress, then stop. It's very important to choose something workable.

Another meditation on subtle impermanence can use breath. Bring the awareness to the feeling of the abdomen rising and falling, expanding and contracting. When the awareness stabilizes on this movement, then contemplate that with each rising and falling, you are one breath closer to death. With each breath, everything in your body is changing—your eyes, ears, muscles, and tendons, everything. This is subtle impermanence.

When you become familiar with working with the subtle impermanence of your body through the heart and the breath, you might try working with the changing sensations of heat to cold, from pleasure to pain or discomfort. Stay aware of feelings and sensations changing all the time. You might notice the sensation of air as it enters the nostrils and the way that this differs from the sensation of the out-breath.

If meditating on your own death provokes unworkable fear or anxiety, then consider using this fear and anxiety to investigate fear of dying and why it's so hard to accept death, or you may wish to think about someone else dying. Generally fear comes from grasping, and fear of death is quite natural. The point is not to get rid of the fear, but to use the sensation to support your awareness practice. If you can stabilize an awareness of the sensation, then you might discover a lessening in the fear itself.

Recalling a story or situation can also bring forth the fear, but to make the practice effective, you need to separate from the story. If you can stand back and separate from the story, you can break the identification with the fear, and the intensity of the sensation will subside. You can also alternate between applying meditative awareness and "thinking about" impermanence and fear of death.

My Father's Death

Many Westerners assume that fear inevitably accompanies dying. With my father's death, I saw that fear does not always accompany dying.

For many years my father had been sick with diabetes. Toward the end, Tsoknyi Rinpoche and I were with him at Nagi Gompa. One day, with no obvious change in his circumstances, he began thanking everyone who had helped care for him: a few nuns who were also trained nurses, the doctor who had visited regularly, the cook, and so forth. My brother and I looked at each other and shrugged as if to ask, "What's happening?" We had no idea why he was thanking everyone.

The next morning it took some effort for him to get up to pee. When he came back to bed, he sat in meditation posture. We said, "You are tired, perhaps you should lie down to rest."

He said, "No." He was smiling and looked very comfortable.

Then his breath started to slow down. One nun thought he was losing oxygen and administered medication through an inhaler, but the breath continued to slow, with longer exhalations and shorter inhalations until the breath stopped. His face was very relaxed, with a kind of iridescent, pearl-like quality tinged with red. His room became very peaceful. His body remained in meditation posture for three days, and then very slowly his body started leaning to the right until he fell onto that side.

My father used to say, "For the yogi, sickness is a pleasure, and death is good news." The good news is that dying provides the best opportunity for enlightenment. When the physical body loses energy, when the organs close down, and the fluids dry up, and the breathing slows, then our buddha nature becomes more prominent. The natural demise of the sensory system effortlessly uncovers naked awareness. The fixations, concepts, and dualities that have held our delusions in place dissolve—even for those who have never meditated. What's left is a very basic form of ignorance—the inability to recognize the nature of our own awareness. Yet with the dissolution of the body, the gap between the mind of ignorance and the wisdom mind grows very, very narrow. The natural disintegration of the body magnifies the opportunity for the mind to recognize the fundamental purity of its true nature.

When breathing ceases, awareness manifests with vivid clarity, because the more coarse aspects of consciousness—such as words, concepts, and sense perceptions—are no longer present. But often this flash of pure awareness goes unrecognized. This glimpse of the true nature

of mind may only last for a few moments. Most people will miss this opportunity entirely, yet those who have already recognized the true nature of mind can have a very clear experience of buddha nature. They may even be able to rest in that state of recognition for several days, which allows the process of purification and realization to continue. This means that death allows for the attainment of complete enlightenment. While we remain alive, even people who have reached a very high level of realization may have some trace of concepts, some slight trace of fixated mind. The process of physical dissolution allows the mind to be totally purified of these traces. In this sense, my father became completely enlightened after sitting in dying meditation for three days.

When Sickness Is Not a Pleasure

Let's assume that at this stage of our journey, sickness does not invite pleasure, and death is not such great news. Still, we don't have to yield to conventional strategies of avoidance. Some people fear death in ways that make them depressed or despondent. For a dharma practitioner, fear of death can be the source of dynamic energy. We can really use this fear to become more alive and open to the present moment, and to set our direction toward liberation.

If you find that fear overwhelms your experiments with meditation on dying, then try another approach. Select an activity that holds some fear for you, preferably something that you actually do, such as horseback riding or rock climbing; or choose a social activity, such as public speaking or hosting an event. Select any activity that makes you uptight, that makes your hands clammy or your mouth dry. Allow the situation to support your meditation. Bring your awareness to the sensations in your body. You are now fully cognizant of the sensations of fear, but the awareness itself frees you from being controlled by fear or overwhelmed by it. Now what do you feel? Perhaps some sense of joy pervades your body, which may come from using the fear and working with it, not running away or feeling enslaved to it.

The ultimate benefit of meditating on impermanence is accepting the reality of our limited time in this precious human body, and using this

acceptance to arouse our sincere aspirations to turn away from samsara and toward awakening. If we investigate impermanence through meditating on death and dying, that is fine. It is also fine to start with phenomena that are less fraught than our own existence. Either way, our meditation should make us thoroughly comfortable with the inevitability of change, even when we are dying.

Once I visited Cape Breton in northern Nova Scotia, where the marine weather is very changeable: sun, rain, fog, sun, rainbows, clouds, rain again, all in one day. Local people say, "If you don't like the weather, wait a few minutes." We could say the same about our mind or our moods: "If you don't like your mood, wait a minute." It will change—if we let it. It is not anchored inside. If we stop grasping onto it, it will blow through, like a cloud passing over the sun—but we have to let it go. As for changes in our body, we have no choice. But we can examine how holding on and fixating to the body as if it did not change creates anguish.

When we begin to accept that change expresses the inevitable nature of relative reality, then we can begin to close the gap between what we want and what we get. We are taming the mind that is flapping around in the winds of desire and delusion. When we combine contemplation on impermanence with meditation, then our mind can develop stability and not be pushed and pulled by every little circumstance. In this process, much of the energy that we lose to agitation and dissatisfaction can be harnessed to develop lasting wisdom and compassion for ourselves and others. We are turning away from the immediate pleasures of samsaric attractions and turning toward the long-range path of liberation.

Impermanence: The Relative Truth

Why do we say that impermanence is the nature of "relative" reality? We have looked at the ways in which things that appear to be permanent are not: trees, tables, our body, and so forth. Compared to this misperception, impermanence is definitely a more "real" view. But it is only more real according to relative reality, because the truth of impermanence is not the ultimate truth.

As we already observed, impermanence is tied to a conventional sense of past, present, and future time. Yet time itself is relative. If I say, "Yesterday I went to the zoo," that statement only exists in the present. If I say, "Tomorrow I will go to the zoo," that too only exists in the present. The past is already gone. The future has not yet arrived. The division of time into seconds, hours, days, months, and so on is simply a matter of convention.

When we say, "This body is impermanent, this table, tree, and entire world system are impermanent," we are assigning to all those phenomena a separate, independent existence. "I will die" presupposes that "I" am a discrete entity who came alive at a specific conception or birth time, and that "my" inherent, substantial existence will terminate when "I" cease breathing. Confronting our own impermanence in this way is definitely helpful. It can definitely energize our commitment to dharma and to renouncing the seductions of samsara.

Accepting the impermanence of all phenomena is the best antidote to suffering. It is certainly more in alignment with the authentic nature of reality. But the view remains permeated with conventional perception because it attributes to all phenomena a false sense of inherent, independent existence that has a discrete beginning and ending.

Yet the origins of situations are not so obvious. What makes the water in a river flow? What makes the river dry up or the woman overreact to a ruined dress? What is the true origin of my own existence? What are the causes and conditions? In the next section we look at karma, the law of cause and effect. Karma too is subject to a conventional, relative sense of past, present, and future. When we combine impermanence and karma, we further dismantle our cherished concept of an individuated self. The concept of an "I" who came into existence at a specific time and place and who will maintain an inherent, individuated self may not quite compute in the same way as it once did.

Furthermore, it is this individuated, independent "self" that assigns the very same qualities to other phenomena. "I" with my inherent "I-ness" experiences my car as if it too has an inherent car-ness, a fixed identity independent of causes and conditions. But it does not. As the fixations of the false sense of self dissolve, the objects around us also

begin to lose their apparent solidity. For example, a family photograph may show solid people sitting on solid chairs with substantial trees behind them. If we blow up this photograph on the computer, we get a pixilated version. As we continue to enlarge the image, each small bit of form becomes shot through with space until the familiar shapes become unrecognizable.

If we allow for this experience, we can feel for ourselves that the transformation of form opening up into spaciousness, into emptiness—into openness itself—is just how reality works. For example, if we take apart a table, a tree, a computer, a car, or a human body, form loses its solidity. If we reassemble the parts, we recreate the form. What initially appears to be solid and stable is actually just a collection of atoms colliding into each other, and these atoms are themselves mostly space. The more we look, the less we find. The mutability of form—whether we are constructing or deconstructing—could not exist without the reality of emptiness. Emptiness allows for all possibilities. Emptiness does not cancel or annihilate form. It is not nothingness. Blowing up the image on the computer did not destroy the image. It allowed us to see it in a different way. And if we reduce the size, we recreate the original scale.

The *Heart Sutra* says, "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness, and emptiness not other than form." We cannot truly know one without the other. In order to understand the relative world of form, we must understand the absolute world of emptiness. For example, in our samsaric confusion we continue to identify forms that are impermanent as permanent, fixed, and lasting. We cling to family, home, reputation, all the time failing to see that grasping onto what will certainly dissolve creates suffering. In ngondro practice, we return to form and emptiness again and again to investigate the ways we create suffering. The decay of our body, the growth of seed into grain, the transition from spring into summer, all attest to impermanence. But it is emptiness that allows all this change to happen. Without the absolute reality of emptiness, forms would remain static, immutable. But they do not.

When we meditate on impermanence, we may become sad or even depressed. With its association to relative time and to the ending of

things, meditating on impermanence may lead to melancholy. At first, we may react to the truth of our precious impermanent body by grasping even more tightly to it. When we understand the big gap between what we want and how things actually work, we may feel resigned to begrudgingly accept that everything—including our own body and those of our loved ones—changes, dissolves, and dies.

But impermanence isn't just defined by decay, rot, and disintegration. Impermanence allows us to access the diamonds and see more than just the mud. Our neurotic, limited, confused sense of self is not anchored inside us. Our patterns of self-denigration, grasping, anger, and anguish are also impermanent. Because of impermanence, we can change—if we want to. But we do not have all the time in the world. When the recognition of impermanence shakes us into accepting the certain demise of our body, then we really aspire to make the most of our life. The truth of impermanence becomes the wind at our backs, urging us not to squander the precious opportunity that we have right now.

6. The Third Thought That Turns the Mind

KARMA

I had heard my father talk about karma many times. But once I started my ngondro studies at Sherab Ling, I became quite anxious about the separation between what I thought I should know about karma and what I actually did know. So before our studies reached the third thought, I went to see Saljay Rinpoche. Looking gravely serious, I told him, "You know, I don't really understand the meaning of karma."

Saljay Rinpoche burst out laughing. I was only thirteen, and even older students stumble on this concept, although the basic logic is not difficult. Essentially this is the law of cause and effect, or the law of interdependence.

Once he stopped laughing, Saljay Rinpoche presented the classic way of introducing young monks to karma. "Have you ever planted anything?" he asked.

I recalled how I loved walking through the fields in Nubri with my mother and grandmother, especially when I was given a cup filled with seeds. Then Saljay Rinpoche asked what conditions were necessary for the seeds to grow. "Soil," I told him, "plus sunlight, good weather, rain, and weeding."

He said, "That's how interdependence works. Plus you need time, as well as the absence of obstacles such as storms and droughts, and also animals that eat seeds, such as birds or deer. You need all the necessary conditions. Less sun than normal will make your grain short. Too much rain may wash away the seeds. If the causes or the conditions change,

the result will change. But with a certain set of causes and conditions, nothing can change the result. If you plant a seed of grain, it can never produce a potato or a rose."

Then Saljay Rinpoche told me that as a young monk, he had a dharma friend who went on a pilgrimage. In Tibet these trips often demanded weeks of walking with heavy backpacks and nights spent in lonely caves. Traveling from eastern Tibet to Lhasa, he was crossing one high mountain surrounded by snow when he stopped to prepare his midday meal. He put down his pack and set out to look for three stones. He brought those back and placed them in a small circle, then set out again to look for twigs. He put the wood between the stones and took out a small pot to boil snow for tea. He could not make his fire with flint so he set out again to look for dry grass in the crevices of rocks. Finally he got a fire going. He melted snow to make tea and drank it with barley flour.

Then he sat back against a rock to relax. Whatever direction he looked in, he saw so many footprints that at first he became almost alarmed. Then he realized that they were all his own. For a long time, he stared at all those footprints and thought about how many causes and conditions were required to make one cup of tea. And about how each aspect was interdependent with the other—the snow, the pot, the wood, the grass, and the stones.

Why is it so important to understand interdependence? With the first thought, we develop confidence in our capacity for self-discovery by recognizing that we already have everything we need. But, as we learned in the second thought, this opportunity is fleeting, inspiring us to best use the time that we have. In order to do this, understanding karma and the law of cause and effect is critical. Just as our human birth provides the potential to awaken, our everyday activities, moment after moment, hold the same potential.

Daily life is a sequence of cause-and-effect activities. It's how the world works. To make tea, first we boil water. To make the light come on, first we flip a switch. The concept of karma enters when we add ethical intention to cause and effect: virtuous activity leads to positive experience, and nonvirtuous activity leads to negative experience. When

we extend our investigations of cause and effect to intention, motivation, impulses, incentives, and so forth, then we can recognize that this same interplay between cause and effect conditions our mind and shapes our experience. If we want to be happy, we must figure out what causes and conditions lead to well-being. Similarly, if we don't have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how could we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?

The Consequences of Behavior

We speak of ten nonvirtuous activities associated with body, speech, and mind. Killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct are the three nonvirtuous activities of the body. The four nonvirtuous types of speech are lying, divisive speech, harsh words, and gossip. The three nonvirtuous activities of mind are the inability to rejoice in others' happiness or success, or when others' happiness becomes the cause of our own suffering; the second is the wish to see harm and suffering come to others; the third is wrong views, such as disregarding the law of cause and effect, or dismissing other important Buddhist principles.

Then we have ten virtuous activities that are the opposite of these: using the body to perform acts of generosity, including helping or protecting others; engaging in pleasing speech that promotes equanimity and harmony; holding views that support the well-being of others; and so forth. Yet some activities are not black and white, which is why Saljay Rinpoche used to emphasize the importance of intention. Let's say we cause harm not out of anger, spite, revenge, or other personal motives, but rather we cause harm in order to protect others. A police officer might shoot one person in order to protect fifty hostages. The motive is to protect lives; harm is the method. What's the karma of the situation? We cannot deny the good intention. At the same time, the good intention cannot wipe the slate clean in terms of negative karma.

Stories in Buddhist history show that harming one person, even to save fifty lives, will still lead to an experience of suffering. But if an act is well-intentioned, the karmic effect is much different than an act of aggression motivated by the intention to harm. Furthermore, the mind

of one who unintentionally harms in order to help others is not conditioning itself for future aggression. Intention and motivation must be investigated very carefully.

Also, intention can transform neutral activities into positive ones. Take sleeping as an example of a neutral activity. We may hope for a good night's rest, but generally we do not apply any further aspiration. But we could. We already touched on bodhichitta—the mind of enlightenment. When we go to bed at night with the mind of bodhichitta, we aspire that our sleep be the cause of increased capacity to help all beings attain enlightenment. Once we apply bodhichitta to cause and effect, every moment offers an opportunity to turn away from samsara and toward awakening. Once we make a commitment to liberating ourselves and others from samsaric confusion, we must wake up to the moral implications of our behavior. Ordinary life is filled with options for moral choices, and we must take responsibility for the choices that we make.

Karmic Conditions

We know about planting a seed, and we know that causes and conditions will affect the result. Yet we cannot explain an ice storm that ruins our crops, or why one lobster gets caught in the fisherman's trap while another crawls away. Why did some Tibetans make it over the Himalayas and others did not? Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche fled Tibet in 1959 with a group of seventy people. One night as they were crossing the mountains, Chinese soldiers opened fire, shooting everywhere. The next morning only five Tibetans were alive. Khen Rinpoche and four others continued their journey on foot across the highest Himalayan passes into India.

Thousands of human histories strike us as remarkable precisely because we can't account for them. I have a friend in Los Angeles whose father came from a Jewish family in Berlin. When the Nazis first started their campaign to exterminate Jews, my friend's father begged his family to leave Germany, but they told him, "Don't worry. We'll be all right." Night after night he argued with his parents and brothers

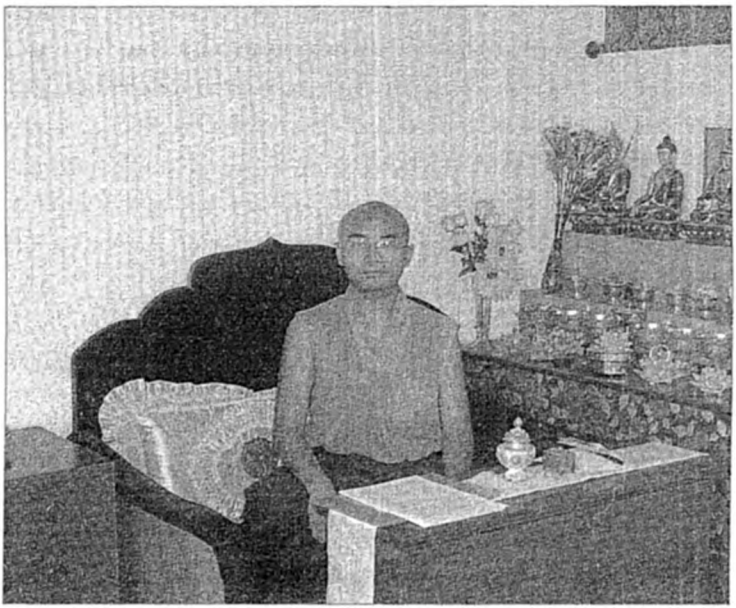
and sisters, saying, "We can all leave together, now." Finally he set off on his own.

After the war, he learned that his parents, brothers, and sisters had all been killed in the death camps. For the rest of his life, he tried to make sense of what happened. He made a good life with family and friends, but his daughter told me, "What I remember most about my father was his bewilderment. He didn't express anger. But all his life he tried to understand why he was alive and his siblings were not."

Without understanding karma, we assess the present situation only in terms of what we know about actions in this lifetime. But just as we named all the causes and conditions needed to grow a seed, every result—every present moment—has as many causes and conditions. If we do not consider this, then we are always trying to figure out our life from the narrowest view. We do not see all possibilities, which does not mean that we remember our past lives, or that we remember details that explain our present situation. It doesn't work that way. Yet if we investigate karma and the dynamic of cause and effect, we accept that dozens of causes and conditions account for the present, even if we cannot name them.

Because people generally cannot recall their past lives, they find it hard to apply karma to the present. That is why, for now, it is good to simply investigate how cause and effect works. And then we can apply this to the future, because the future is the next hour or day. When we become familiar with how cause and effect work within this lifetime, then we might consider how that applies beyond this lifetime.

Many people think of their lives as engines that require fuel. When the fuel runs out, we die. But once we recognize the all-pervasive workings of karma, we understand that death is not a final and complete disappearance. We finish with this body, but the continuity of the mind will move on to another existence. The mind is not a static entity that never changes. It's actually changing all the time. Each moment of consciousness acts as the primary condition for the next. The continuity of mind has an intimate relationship with the body, but it is not entirely dependent on the body and does not entirely disappear when the body dies. Just as the law of physics states that the amount of energy in a given



Mingyur Rinpoche in his quarters at Sherab Ling, 2004.

system does not change, but rather changes form, the ever-changing stream of consciousness never ceases, though it may inhabit different physical bodies.

Every action has a cause and a result—no exceptions. Dying is an activity, and it too has causes, conditions, and results. In this way, it is no different than any activity that we can examine, such as planting a seed. What contributes to the next form that our mind will take? The activities of our present body, speech, and mind direct what form we take in the future. Results never appear without causes and conditions.

The important point about karma is to understand causes and conditions in terms of the mind, not merely in terms of external circumstances. Once we identify our quest as uncovering the true nature of mind, then we must identify the causes and conditions that support this pursuit. What activities incline a mind toward awakening? What activities impede our quest? The law of karma exists whether we understand it or not. With understanding, however, we can deliberately cultivate conditions that best support our resolve to wake up.

Using Doubt

The concept of reincarnation poses an obstacle for many people. You don't have to accept reincarnation in order to begin these practices. With time you may see things differently, but you shouldn't allow doubt to stop you.

The Buddha encouraged his disciples to use doubt to invigorate their investigations of his teachings. One time in ancient India, the Kalama people told the Buddha that so many teachers passed through and presented so many different views that they did not know who or what to believe, or how to discern truths from falsehoods. The Buddha told them, "It makes perfect sense that you are perplexed by so many differing views." He did not say, "I am the best and you must follow me." Confirming that their uncertainty was sane, he told them not to rely on tradition, legend, reports, or conjecture, but to experiment and learn for themselves, to test which actions were skillful and helpful and which were unskillful and harmful. Discernment will come with awareness.

The Buddha told his followers to treat his teachings in the same way as "the wise test gold." We do not estimate the worth of gold by face value. "Just as you test gold . . . by burning, cutting, and rubbing it on a [piece of touchstone], so are you to accept my words after examining them and not merely out of regard for me."

Karma and Responsibility

Steady awareness of our actions may not reveal or explain the long-term karmic history of any given event. Situations arise that we cannot account for. Yet if our investigations confirm that cause and effect explain so many aspects of daily life, then it makes sense to extend this same dynamic to what we cannot see, cannot examine, and cannot explain. Everything that exists is the result of cause and effect, including you and me.

Yet we cannot take cause and effect too literally. Let's say that every day we pray to win the lottery, but we never buy a ticket: a simple study in cause and non-effect! Joking aside, let's say we win the lottery.

Generally winning is considered a rare and positive outcome. We do not know the cause of this outcome—that is, the cause beyond buying the ticket, since millions of people buy tickets and very few win. Yet we accept the effect (winning) without needing to fully understand the cause (why our ticket was chosen, rather than someone else's). Here is where the concept of karma becomes difficult: it requires that we accept responsibility for outcomes that we cannot account for. We don't know the cause, but we still take responsibility for the effect. Of course this is easier to accept when the effect is positive.

Let's say we're in a car collision. One response may be to immediately identify who's at fault. Maybe the other driver did not signal properly, or perhaps our own car malfunctioned. Perhaps we can sue the automobile manufacturer. We might ask, "Who is responsible?" This might actually mean, "Who is to blame? Who is at fault?"

In the Buddhist view of karma, even if the highway patrol determines we were not at fault, we still accept that this negative experience results from negative karma. The fact that the police verify that we did not cause this accident does not mean that we were neutral participants. We will never know the reasons that certain things happen. But that does not invalidate or dismiss the interdependent connections at play. If we assume that not knowing something means that therefore it does not exist, we fall into nihilism. For example, say we think, "I do not know why I was in this car accident, therefore it has nothing to do with my past or my future, and that is the end of the story." This way of thinking reflects a very limited, subjective view.

Karma Is Not Destiny

Karma is not destiny. It is not fate. It has become popular to conclude, "That's my karma," in a way that implies, "There's nothing I can do about this." That's a complete misunderstanding. We are born with impulses and inclinations, tastes and characteristics. That's obvious. Yet our impulse for aggression does not necessarily lead to murder. Our instinct for kindness does not necessarily lead to boundless compassion. The maturation of any instinct, like that of a seed, depends on circum-

stances and conditions. But it remains our responsibility to make the most of what we have, and what we are born with, by taking the reins and directing our activities.

Karma contributes to the everyday situations that we find ourselves in. It contributes to our family context, the type of work we do, and our financial circumstances. It shapes our appetites and behavior. It increases and decreases possibilities. Karma is not a life sentence, but more like a predilection that we can work with—and change. It is not immutable.

With shamata practice, we learn to detect impulses in their early stages. We can check an impulse toward anger before exploding like a volcano. If we do not recognize that impulse, then the repetition of angry outbursts strengthens the tendency toward anger and creates its own karmic energy, its own propensity for reoccurrence. Recognition allows us to disrupt the habitual identification that we have with the impulse, and therefore to separate from it. We can also learn to cultivate our impulse for kindness so that it permeates our entire being for our own benefit and that of others. Our humanness provides us with the choice between positive and negative. Our karma may shift the balance one way or another. But the choices that we make are our responsibility, and they condition our future.

We can neither direct nor control all aspects of our life. Virtuous activities do not necessarily protect us from obstacles. From the view of cause and effect over many lifetimes, this is explained by the negative effects of past actions, which in some cases are too strong to be dissipated in one life, no matter what we do. And within one lifetime, it seems that good things happen to people who engage in negative acts. This can seem "unjust" if the assessment is within one lifetime. But using activities that we remember from this life to fully explain the karma of any one event is like trying to fit a house into a shoe. It won't happen.

Once we examine the law of cause and effect within what is knowable, it becomes easier to accept the dynamic of karma, whether we can see it or not. The fact that we cannot see it, hear it, or touch it does not prove that the law has shut down and is out of service. It's not like the elevator that stops working when the power goes off. It's more like the

electric field in the earth's atmosphere that remains in continuous play, whether we have power or not.

No one lives without obstacles. But that's no excuse for careless behavior. For example, seeing that everyone experiences some degree of suffering, we might think, "What difference does it make how I behave? I will have problems no matter what I do." Even if we cannot comprehend that aspects of this life may be influenced by an unknowable past, we can keep in mind that our actions today will affect our life tomorrow. If looking back brings up too much resistance, then look forward. Look to the future. The future is not a destination location, nor an arbitrary direction that we stumble upon. We create the future right now. Rather than trying to comprehend past causes by their present effects, take responsibility for future effects. In this way we become our own protectors. Our behavior—how we relate to the world around us, even with very difficult situations—becomes the most reliable means of protecting our mind from anxiety and dissatisfaction. Stay with this. With more practice, you might want to look at the whole thing.

Short-Term Cause and Effect

Try to investigate cause and effect in terms of things that are easy to understand. For example, how do we set ourselves up for the coming day? Perhaps we have a commitment to meditate every morning for ten minutes or for one hour. Yet we may rise late, or our boss insists on a breakfast meeting, or the plumber bangs on the door. We rush out without the benefits of meditation. Additionally, our mind is disturbed by not fulfilling our commitment to practice. This leads to annoyance, maybe even to angry self-recrimination: "What is the matter with me! I am such an idiot. Of course I could have gotten up earlier." So now we leave in a cloud of self-preoccupation and anger. With this state of mind, the chances of not seeing the patch of ice on the path, or hearing the truck coming up from behind, greatly increase.

So just look at that kind of cause and effect. A mind thrown off balance by misplacing the remote control is a mind further conditioned for agitation, with increased potential to create more misery for oneself

and others. Imagine a fight within the family at the breakfast table, between the parents or between the parents and children: bad words and accusations fly through the air, and everyone leaves the house with nothing resolved. Imagine how this disharmony influences the rest of the morning. And then imagine all the possible outcomes caused by so much negativity. What happens on the way to work? What happens to the child at school? Work with this kind of short-term cause and effect for now. Bring awareness to even the subtlest sorts of disturbance and the ways in which they affect the next activity.

One benefit of these short-term daily life examples is that they help unhook the mind from thinking of karmic effects in terms of concrete, quantifiable "things." For example, we might think, "It is my good karma to have this nice house, to buy this beautiful car, to have this big sum of money." Or the reverse. There's a tendency to pile things up on the scales and try to weigh the effects of good and bad.

But the most important aspect of karma relates to the state of our mind. At some point, whether we meditate or not, we learn that certain activities disturb the mind. When we apply awareness to cause and effect, we cultivate recognition of subtle shifts in mental behavior, and we become more sensitive to how an agitated mind affects other activities. If we don't pay our bills, we might become so afraid that the bill collectors will call or knock on the door that we become increasingly anxious, until we are in serious psychological trouble. In the same way, taking an opportunity to help in small ways, such as helping a lady lift her toddler's stroller onto a bus, giving up a seat on the subway, even just smiling more than usual, can condition the mind to generate more goodwill and can infuse the whole atmosphere with some subtle sense of kindness.

I was in a taxicab with a friend in New York City, and I questioned her about the cost and the high tip. She explained that she always thinks, "If the driver is not pleased with his tip, if he has not made enough money for the day, he may go home feeling frustrated and angry, and yell at his wife. Then his wife might become upset and slap the son, and the son might get so angry that he kicks the dog. And maybe a high tip can offset that chain reaction."

Let's use meditation practice to see how cause and effect works. We'll start with something that we consider negative.

Guided Meditation on Karma

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Keep your eyes open or closed.
- Rest in open awareness.
- Next recall a time when you were overcome by anger. Take a minute or two to remember the experience and what it felt like at the time.
- Think about how the anger influenced your thoughts, feelings, and actions. What did you say, think, or do as you were overpowered by the anger? What happened next? How did the anger and actions that were triggered by the anger affect your experience in the future? What was the immediate effect? Were there any long-term effects, for yourself, in your relationships, or in circumstances around you?
- After contemplating this situation for a few minutes, take a break for a minute or two and just rest the mind in open awareness.
- Now return to the contemplation on karma. This time, think of karma in terms of a positive feeling, such as compassion.
- Recall a time when you felt filled with love or compassion. Take a minute or two to remember the feeling.
- Try to connect with how the feeling of love or compassion influenced your thoughts, feelings, and actions. What did you say, think, or do as a result of this feeling? What happened next? How did this feeling and the actions that were triggered by love or compassion affect your experience in the future? What was the immediate effect? Were there any long-term effects for yourself, in your relationships, or in circumstances around you?
- Try this for five to ten minutes.
- Conclude with resting in open awareness.

Mind as Process

One of the most challenging aspects regarding negative karma concerns the tendency to confuse being a bad person with doing a bad activity. Feeling angry, and even expressing anger, does not define us any more than a cloud defines the sky. But it's hard to take responsibility for a "bad" action if we continue to identify one bad act with being a thoroughly bad person. Yet that happens a lot.

To investigate this, let's look at the term *mind.* In English, *mind* suggests something solid and fixed. In Tibetan, there are many words for mind, but the most common is *sem,* which does not suggest an object. *Sem* refers to mental activity and to the process of cognition. The word itself suggests flux, change, and flexibility. If we hold a fixed, rigid, inflexible view of the mind's process, then one incident might be misidentified as exemplifying a "permanent" condition. For example, many intelligent children do poorly on academic tests and then feel stupid forever. For many teenagers, a one-sided crush establishes personal failure. In each example, one small piece of a vast jigsaw puzzle has been taken as the entire picture.

Once we understand mind as process, then we can watch our past negative activities without recoiling. And if we can bring this understanding into the present, our capacity to remain cognizant of our behavior helps us change patterns that we consider unhealthy or destructive to others and ourselves. One mind-moment may have long-range consequences in terms of cause and effect, but it still does not define who we are. In order to completely realize our human potential, we want to connect with the basic goodness of our buddha nature and allow it to permeate our being. But if we make a habit of defining our entire being by discrete acts of negative behavior, our task becomes quite difficult.

Reward and Punishment

Say someone trips on an uneven sidewalk—quite a common occurrence. One response might be: "I wonder what I did to cause this?" This does

not mean assessing how uneven sidewalks figure in our past. The misstep might reveal a lack of awareness. Yet another person might think: "Which city agency is responsible? I will sue them." One person accepts responsibility for what happened, even if there is no obvious answer. The other's reaction is to blame someone, to feel victimized by outside forces, and to wish for revenge.

Which attitude creates more suffering? In the first case, we accept responsibility. This is not the same as self-recrimination: "Oh, I am so clumsy. Stupid me." Not like that. Because whether we blame ourselves or blame others, either way the self solidifies its own importance. If we think, "I will find the person responsible for causing me to trip," that implies that someone did something intentionally to hurt us. This attitude depends on a fixated sense of self. But with an acceptance of karma, taking responsibility becomes a learning tool, not a scale for measuring reward and punishment.

In the Buddhist sense of karma, no culturally conditioned codes define right and wrong behavior. There is no rule to be broken or maintained. The law of karma recognizes that all phenomena are naturally interdependent; all activities have positive, negative, or neutral effects. If the waiter's mind is preoccupied with personal chatter—various expressions of ego-fixation—then he or she cannot pay full attention to the customers. If the meditator's mind is disturbed by memories or projections that keep the mind agitated, then it cannot bring full attention to awareness. If awareness becomes our way of experiencing the truth, then we want as much clarity as possible.

Engaging in nonvirtuous activities obviously has direct undesirable results; additionally, activities that cause problems keep the mind muddled and fog up the lens of perception. The traditional way of describing nonvirtuous behavior is behavior that causes an undesirable result. Part of this undesirable result is how it affects the lives of those who may be the object of undesirable behavior, but another part is the disturbed mind of the one who performed the behavior. And this in turn sets up the conditions for future nonvirtuous behavior, and further hinders the possibilities for virtuous activity.

The main point here is to understand karma not only in terms of

external effects, but to recognize the effects on the mind itself. The mind is the source of our liberation. So we do not want to just feel remorse for our bad activity, or for what we did or said that hurt another. We want to recognize whether our behavior, minute after minute, is nurturing the mind of clarity or contributing to ignorance and confusion.

Responsibility and Control

People who lack an understanding of karma often confuse responsibility with control. For example, with a diagnosis of cancer they might conclude that they caused this disease and are responsible for having it. This may lead to rethinking incidents from their past in order to account for this illness. This tends to be accompanied by an assumption that atonement for particular incidents may lead to healing. But actually we cannot always know the vast number of causes that might account for any one effect, like a life-threatening illness.

Taking responsibility does not mean taking control of the situation or dictating the outcome. When this attempt is made, rather than take responsibility in the sense of acceptance—even when the causes remain unknown or unknowable—it becomes like playing at being an omnipotent god: "I made this happen. I can unmake this. I am responsible for this cancer, for this pain in my back, for this accident. I, I, I—this me in this body in this lifetime—can do anything." This confuses responsibility with control and ownership. The more we relate to things, including our own body, in terms of an "I" who can manipulate and control all the circumstances, the more restricted and tight the mind becomes. When we do not recognize that any one activity or event is the result of an entire range of causes and conditions, then the self may develop an elaborate delusion of itself: "Everything I do depends on my own decision, on my own insight and calculations." This denies the interrelatedness of all phenomena and falsely individuates the self.

Once we apply our investigations of cause and effect to all activities, we can quickly see that every result is due to so many causes and conditions that "independence" can never accurately apply to anything. The strong identification with a limited, distinct, separate "I" dissolves

through understanding the countless causes and conditions of our existence.

Confusing responsibility with ownership and trying to control the outcome deifies the ego and leads to more suffering, because when something goes wrong—which of course it will, since that's how life works—we feel shame and regret, and think that because of what we now deem miscalculations and poor decisions, it's all our fault. Now we definitely think of ourselves as a bad person.

Without understanding karma, we tend to view our life in terms of decisions and activities that we can identify, which reinforces egocentricity. The teachings on karma propose that we do our very best each moment and trust in the positive outcome of positive actions—which we may never see or know about. We do not focus on the result, nor seek external rewards for our good behavior. Rather we take advantage of our human existence to cultivate a mind that uses every opportunity to orient itself more and more toward happiness and liberation for ourselves and for others. If we can get a handle on how this works hour by hour, day by day, then we can trust in the benefits over longer stretches of time.

We have amazing opportunities in daily life to set our direction. Initially it helps to explore karma within the boundaries of what we know or can guess, such as planting a seed. But after that, we can broaden our investigations to questions that we cannot answer. Once we become comfortable seeing ourselves within an increasingly large picture of cause and effect, then at some point we might ask: How did I get here? Why am I here? What were the causes and conditions that resulted in my being born into this body, into this family, into this society?

Good Karma or Bad?

Tibetans tell a story about the hopelessness of trying to figure out the karmic value of any one activity. A man, a woman, and their son live on a small farm on the western plateau. They work hard to grow enough food to stay alive, and they have only one prized possession: a handsome black stallion. They use this horse to transport salt or skins if

they have enough for trade. To till their hard soil, they hitch this horse to a plow. They dote on this horse and feed it better than they feed themselves.

Then one day the horse runs away. The man, the woman, and the son set out searching in different directions, but their beloved horse cannot be found. They feel so sorry for themselves and pray to the local deities, begging forgiveness for whatever caused their bad fortune. With the winter snows, the passes to the plateau become blocked. After many cold months, the short dark days grow longer. The snows begin to melt, leading them to worry about how to fertilize the soil without their horse.

One spring morning their beautiful horse returns, followed by a strong young mare. The family is so happy. They hug and kiss the horse. The mare is shy and a little wild, but the son offers to tame her. The family marvels at their good fortune to own two fine horses. The son gets a halter and a long rope and begins walking the mare in circles. Soon she's trotting and allowing the son to touch her sides and to pick up her feet. Then she lets him get on her back. Things proceed very well, until one day the son and the mare ride too close to some grazing yaks. The mare spooks and bucks the boy off. He returns home with a broken leg. The parents despair because they depend on their only child to help with the farm. The fall leaves the boy with a severe limp. He tires easily and cannot put in a full day's work. What will happen to them now?

One day they hear the thundering of hoofs racing toward the farm. A recruiting party for the army arrives to enlist the son. But when the officers see how badly the young man limps, they ride off without him. The parents are so relieved that they bring out barley beer to celebrate.

This story belongs to everyone. Everyone has mixed karma. Everyone's life combines positive experiences and misfortunes. Things that create suffering start out as causes of joy, and the reverse is just as true. This is the way life works.

I have many students who cannot express enough appreciation for their lives in dharma. Yet how did their connection to dharma come about? In quite a few cases, through personal tragedy. I have several students whose young sons were killed in car accidents. What the Buddhist

teachings offer is how to work with these emotional extremes, how to make the most of our situation whether it is good, bad, or neutral.

With good karma–bad circumstances, we might be born human, but into a family where poverty, famine, or lack of educational options hamper the chances for happiness. With good circumstances–bad karma, we might be born as a dog, but into a wealthy family that pampers and protects us. All beings have mixed karma. Everybody.

Practicing with karma shifts how we understand our everyday behavior with friends and family, at home and in the workplace. The possibilities of what we have done, and what we can do, become infinite. Everyone experiences suffering. But the degree of suffering, and of negative conditions and circumstances in the future, results from the present. This is why, in the sequence of the four thoughts, karma comes before the truth of suffering, because how we lead our life in the present shapes our life in the future. We remain subject to causes and conditions, but the immeasurable advantage of our human existence is that they do not define us. Anything is possible. And once we recognize the fluid nature of karma, then it's easier to extend that possibility to becoming a buddha, which means recognizing that we are already a buddha.

7. The Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind

SUFFERING

So far our concerns have centered on circumstances that inspire awakening: arousing confidence in our inherent capacities, the certainty of impermanence, and how everyday behavior can condition our mind for liberation. These contemplations move us toward breaking the habitual patterns that keep us spinning in samsara. With the fourth thought that turns the mind, suffering itself becomes the object of awareness. The Buddha's insight was that samsara itself contains the conditions that lead to suffering, and that to free ourselves we must work with suffering in a very direct way. This is the Buddha's First Noble Truth: the truth of suffering, or of dukkha.

When people hear the Buddha's first teaching, they may think, "I didn't come to dharma to hear about life's headaches. I already know about that." Most definitely everyone experiences suffering, dissatisfaction, and anguish. But actually people do not investigate the underlying causes of these feelings or what perpetuates them, and most importantly, they do not investigate how to bring them to an end. People spend a lot of effort trying to avoid unhappiness—not facing it, not transforming it, but only trying to make it go away. Obvious examples include drugs and alcohol, computer games, compulsive shopping, or excessive eating. There are thousands of ways to avoid dukkha.

So yes, everyone knows about discontentment, but not many people readily admit that their strategies for feeling good do not work. These

avoidance tactics are like taking medicine without knowing the cause of the sickness. To race around chasing after money, sex, and power as a means to happiness is like trying to cure cancer with a Band-Aid. To cure ourselves, first we need to examine the cause of our sickness.

Suffering as the Gateway to Liberation

Dukkha is the pivot on which we turn away from samsara. It's like walking into those big revolving doors at airports that turn us around: we must turn toward our suffering before we can be released to the other side. The primary point of the Buddha's teaching is that we must accept our suffering in order to be liberated from it. When we resist coming to terms with dukkha, we are left with craving, grasping, and fixation; and by the time we figure out that our avoidance tactics don't work, these habits have become so addictive that they are difficult to break. Yet the Buddha's good news declares that breaking our habits and patterns is definitely possible.

Using suffering as a gateway to liberation was a difficult teaching for me. I tended to pay more attention to suffering than to the part about liberation. Then a funny incident occurred that gave me a glimpse into how this might work. I was twelve years old and still going back and forth between studying with my father in Nepal and studying at Sherab Ling. On this occasion, I was participating in an annual year-end ritual at Sherab Ling that went on for many mornings in a row. About one hundred monks sat in long rows facing each other, with a center aisle that led to the shrine. My place was in the first row and, being a tulku, I sat on an elevated cushion.

On this particular morning it was extremely cold. Sherab Ling sits on the southern side of the Himalayas with majestic snow peaks rising above the pine forests. During the winter months, the days are often warm and sunny but the nights get cold. That morning, at about four o'clock, everyone was chanting with extra enthusiasm just to stay warm. In one hand I held a bell and in the other a *damaru*, a small double-faced drum. Suddenly some disturbance caught the attention of the monks. They began fidgeting and turning their heads, so

I looked too; but in the dim electric light it took me awhile to notice a Western guy tiptoeing toward the front of the hall, moving against the wall opposite my seat. Every time he passed one of the *thangkas,* the meditation paintings that hung high above our heads, he brought his palms together in front of his throat, and then while keeping his palms flat, he thrust them up toward the painting and bowed from the waist. He was wearing a ski jacket but no hat to cover his completely bald head.

When he got to the front of the room, he stepped into the aisle and stopped at my seat. Kneeling, he bowed before me, lowering his head. All the monks had their eyes on me, but I didn't know what to do. So I placed the palm and fingers of my hand on top of his head, in the Tibetan gesture of blessing. And he just freaked out, jumping up wildly as if an electric shock had ripped through him. This scared me, and my body involuntarily jerked back away from him. Then the monks started laughing, and slowly I too figured out that the man did not expect to be touched. He did not know that I had made the gesture for blessing, and on his bald head, my hand felt like an ice cube.

Even though this incident involved the smallest kind of misunderstanding—which was clarified for the visitor later that day—it shows how our projections and expectations shape the moment. If the man had known in advance that the gesture represented something positive, he might have responded in a positive way. The gesture itself is empty of inherent meaning. The value of the gesture—good, bad, or neutral—is imbued by our own mind. It doesn't matter whether the value develops through personal experience or cultural conditioning; it still depends on subjective perception. Furthermore, we can transform any suffering into a blessing because suffering too is just a perception, empty of inherent meaning. And blessings too are empty of inherent meaning.

Natural and Self-Created Suffering

We speak of natural and self-created suffering. Death is the most obvious example of natural suffering. Yet people all over the world agree that fear of death is worse than death itself. A scientist who has been

testing changes in the brain during meditation told me that once we learn to expect a painful stimulus in a certain situation, some regions of the brain become activated before the stimulus occurs. In anticipation of pain, we suffer without feeling the pain. This exemplifies self-created suffering. In my own case, I came to understand that my fear of panic—the fear itself—could trigger a panic attack.

The Buddha called birth, sickness, old age, and death the four rivers of natural suffering, predictable and certain. But fear of death or fear of pain is self-created suffering. We actually do this to ourselves. If we examine the nature of this arbitrary, unnecessary experience of suffering, and if we truly recognize how insubstantial it is, then we can begin to let go of it.

In addition to the four life transitions, natural suffering includes disasters that relate to the four elements, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, fires, and hurricanes. From a conventional view, extreme anguish expresses a normal response to extreme disasters. From the Buddha's view, however, suffering in response to even natural disasters is not inevitable. Since all phenomena are manifestations of emptiness, the perception of all phenomena can be experienced as positive, negative, or neutral. Everything has the innate capacity to be experienced as a blessing. If the man who approached me at Sherab Ling had known the gesture for blessing and had anticipated a positive connection, he would not have freaked out.

Our responses depend on our projections, which are subjective and based on a very incomplete understanding of reality. How we respond to aging and death, earthquakes or floods, depends on our acceptance of things that we cannot change or control. Every sentient being confronts obstacles. Yet negativity comes from attitudes, preconceptions, and resistance, not the obstacles themselves.

Let's say we're rural people living through a drought. Everyone prays for rain. Then rain comes, making everyone happy. The ground becomes soaked, but the rain does not stop. Soon everyone prays for the rain to stop. But it continues. People start cursing the rain. They cannot protect their homes and fields from flooding. They take a stand against the rain. They are fighting the rain, battling it. Now the mind of war sets in. By

the time their houses have been washed away and the crops destroyed, people might feel personally defeated. The rain has won. The farmer has lost.

This demonstrates how suffering becomes self-created in the midst of an environmental disaster. Of course it's a big deal to rebuild houses and replant crops. These genuine hardships cannot be dismissed. Yet our response to catastrophe is no more lodged within us than our exasperation when we're delayed at the airport. The point is to connect with emotional reactivity through awareness—to not be dominated by it—so that we can see how we create suffering for ourselves.

When we turn away from samsara, we stop blaming external situations for the state of our mind, and we begin to use the Buddha's teachings in order to take responsibility for our own well-being. We reorient the mind away from causes and conditions that create suffering. This does not mean that we turn away from the suffering that humans create, such as warfare, poverty, prejudice, slaughter, or environmental destruction. We do not turn away or become passive, impartial spectators. However, we need to assess our strategies for engagement. Many well-meaning people assume that inflaming passions, especially anger, is a justifiable, necessary, even beneficial response to injustice. They often assume that anger is an automatic and inherent response to injustice, in the same way that exasperation is an inherent response to waiting at the airport. But it is not. Anger does not allow us to see clearly, so the good intentions of people engaged in trying to help others can actually be hindered by their own negativity. Anger does not allow us to act with true compassion, because the mind of anger keeps us trapped inside ourselves. Turning away from samsara means figuring out how to function with an open, clear mind, not a mind shut down and incapacitated by destructive emotions.

I know of a woman who helped an environmental organization protest the killing of baby seals in Canada. A public relations campaign displayed horrible images of guys in boats clubbing helpless baby seals amid a sea of blood. It worked; the practice was outlawed. The woman felt very pleased with the outcome, and a few years later she went to visit a village where the slaughter had been banned. She expected to

find positive signs of her efforts, as if all the people would be happy and more at peace with themselves for having this line of work removed from their community. Instead she encountered a community in despair. Alcoholism was widespread, people were moving away, shops had been boarded up. Why? No work. The people had no way to support themselves or care for their children.

Only then did the woman realize that the mission of the organization had focused on saving the seals to the exclusion of considering the people. The seal hunters had been demonized as inhumane killers. The organization promoted compassion for the baby seals, but they could not see the whole picture. They were well-intentioned, but functioned without wisdom. Only when the heat of our own negative passions cools down can our response to difficult situations be informed by clarity, compassion, and equanimity.

Causes versus the Nature of Suffering

When I was still living at Nagi Gompa, I would hear my father say that suffering creates the conditions for happiness. Even though my fears and anxieties gave me a lot of material to work with, I couldn't comprehend my father's point. One day he told me, "Imagine that it's dusk. Not pitch-dark but almost, and through the open window someone tosses a multicolored braided rope into your room. You scream out loud and hide under the table. Why? Because you perceive the rope to be a snake. You begin shaking all over, and then you watch in horror as the snake slithers closer to you. Sweat pours down your face, your heart is thumping, and then, because your good friend heard you scream, he comes running into your room. And you whisper, 'Shhhhhh, don't move, there's a snake at your feet.' And your friend looks down and says, 'What are you thinking? This is a rope.'"

Then my father said, "At that moment, you're so happy. This panic that you have created for yourself has come to an end. Because you created it, you can eliminate it."

The ways that we destroy our equanimity on a daily basis are so "normal" that often they go unnoticed. We smile at someone, and if

they don't smile back, we take it personally. We don't even consider that this person may have just learned that a loved one has died, or that they failed an exam at school, or perhaps they just lost their job. Our own self-preoccupation blocks that possibility. Or we arrange to meet someone at a restaurant, and after twenty minutes we're ready to walk out because we're so annoyed that they have kept us waiting. We could pray that their car has not crashed or that they did not fall on the winter ice, but we're already identified with the projection that they have treated us disrespectfully. Intellectually we know from previous experiences that our friend's lateness probably has nothing to do with us, but the habit of taking things personally is hard to break.

To benefit from this path, nothing is more important than recognizing that we often create our own problems.

Three Types of Suffering

We can approach the truth of suffering through three categories: (1) the suffering of change, (2) the suffering of suffering, and (3) pervasive suffering.

The Suffering of Change

The suffering of change starts off as a pleasant experience. The Buddha compared this experience to taking a nap outside, but hidden beneath the grass are red-hot coals. When you lie down, the grass feels warm and soft. Yet attachment to this lovely sensation leaves us unaware that ever so slowly, we are burning up.

Attachment to pleasure becomes the cause of pain, like eating poisoned candy. Or like smoking cigarettes. Surely we all remember happy moments: feasts, weddings, swimming in the ocean, hiking in the mountains, but these times come close to eating poisoned candy, because the circumstances for dukkha accompany every move, setting us up for the suffering of change. Unless the conditions themselves are uprooted, dissatisfaction will circle back into the situation.

This is the very nature of samsara. We get something that we have

desperately wanted: a sports car, a special dress, a new computer. At first, we're so pleased with our purchase. But our restless mind jumps from one thing to another, pushed by the persistent habit of becoming bored with the repetition of any activity. Soon we lose interest, just as a child loses interest in a new toy. More intense versions of the suffering of change include changing partners only to end up feeling the same way about the new one as the last, or going through the same cycle with a new job, another house, or a different guru.

The Suffering of Suffering

The suffering of suffering includes the natural catastrophes of the elements as well as difficulties such as losing a job, our house burning down, or being diagnosed with a life-threatening disease—situations characterized by exceptional challenges to our equanimity. But even with the harshest circumstances, we can chose not to respond automatically as if under personal attack. Yet to develop equanimity in the face of life's trials, we need to access levels of reality that go beyond cultural conventions.

Pervasive Suffering

The feeling of pervasive suffering is almost neutral, but not quite. Neither pleasure nor pain dominates, yet a low-level dissatisfaction hangs in the air like the background hum of the refrigerator. This is the mind that cannot rest, that cannot find ease, like a dog always scratching its fleas. Such a mind can never settle down.

Working with the Mind of Suffering

The fourth thought works directly with the mind itself. We turn inward. The awareness stays on how perceptions arise, how they inform our reality, and how they create problems. We still use shamata meditation with support, but now the object for support is our own mind. Later on we can work with the view that all suffering is self-created. For now

it's convenient to make a distinction between natural and self-created suffering, so let's start with difficulties that are easy to understand.

As with previous meditations, intense compassion may arise. We don't need to push compassion away, but rather bring the awareness back to feelings of anxiety and discomfort, and try to watch how dissatisfaction arises in the mind. When working with this as a meditation exercise, I suggest starting with someone we know who is having difficulties that we can relate to. We're exchanging self with others for the purpose of connecting to subjective perceptions that distress the mind. We create this exchange with images, words, emotions, and physical feeling.

Working with Self-Created Suffering

Perhaps you have had experiences similar to mistaking a rope for a snake, or mistaking a principled man for a gangster. I did that once. I was at the airport in Denver, Colorado. I had come through all the security checks, having placed my shoes and cell phone in one tray and my computer in another, and I was waiting in the boarding area. Across from that section was another security check where a guard kept staring at me. He did not smile. I kept turning my eyes to see if he was still looking at me. He was a big guy with a dark moustache and thinning hair. I was trying to figure out what I could have done to attract his attention. The more he stared at me, the more I decided that he looked like a mean man, maybe like a Mafia character in the movies. Then he took out his cell phone, and I figured, "OK, this is it. Someone will come for me."

Sure enough, another security officer came up to the first one, and the man with the moustache pointed me out. Then the one who had just arrived stayed behind, and the one with the moustache began walking toward me. As he approached, he asked, "Are you Mister Rompouchee?" I was not sure what he meant and said nothing. Then he asked, "Are you Mister Yongey?"

I sighed with resignation. "Yes, I am," I confessed.

He said, "I just wanted to tell you how much I loved your book and how much it helped me. Thank you!"

Suddenly, we were both smiling and bowing and shaking hands like best friends. But here's the really funny part: once he was back at his security post, I looked at him and thought, "He's a really nice-looking man, a kind person, a very pleasant, cool guy." Without keeping a vigilant watch over my mind, I carelessly allowed it to merge with the general paranoia of the airport atmosphere and to create its own suffering through misperception.

When you contemplate self-created suffering, try to pick a situation that you know about or that feels familiar. If you cannot recall a situation from personal experience, then relate the exercise to someone you know, or even to a movie you have seen or a book you have read. The point is to pick a problematic situation, and then try to identify the views that constructed it—and that can deconstruct it.

Meditation on Self-Created Suffering

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Your eyes can be open or closed.
- Take a minute or two to rest in open awareness.
- Now try to bring to mind a specific event that, due to your erroneous perception, belief, or attitude, created anguish or dissatisfaction.
- Try to connect with the emotional tone of the experience, whether it made you angry or jealous.
- Now recall the relief that followed after you learned the reality of the situation.
- Next consider asking yourself: Where did the misperception arise from? Where did it go? How was it replaced?
- Continue this for five to ten minutes.
- Conclude with resting in open awareness.

Relating to Dukkha in the Six Realms

The fourth thought reorients our relationship to dukkha. We no longer run away as if fleeing an enemy, or deny or repress dukkha. Rather we

stay with all the discomfort and anxiety that may arise, and we breathe it in, knowing that it will not destroy or define us. Our sense of self, even our own happiness, can expand so far beyond its habitual limits that it can accommodate our suffering, and this itself changes how we relate to suffering. Dukkha still exists, but not as a dominant fixture of our identity. The futile patterns that attempt to avoid suffering begin to loosen their grip. Instead of immediately indulging the convention of blaming circumstances for our dissatisfaction, we try to recognize our own participation.

To convince ourselves of the inescapable nature of self-created suffering, let's return to the realms of samsaric existence. In the first thought, I introduced the six realms that manifest the afflictive states: anger, greed, ignorance, desire, jealousy, and pride. At that stage we meditated on a cow as a way of appreciating qualities inherent to humans but lacking in animals, and we connected with ignorance, the specific affliction that pervades the animal realm. For the following meditation, we move our awareness from one realm to another, with the intention of connecting with the distinct suffering that characterizes each one.

Let's say that we return to the cow. This cow has no way of knowing if anyone will bring food or water. If a siren goes off, the cow cannot discern if that signals danger. If the cow's owner leads it away, it cannot tell if it's going for a bath or to slaughter. Stay with the anxiety and anguish that comes from ignorance. Feel the anger of the hell realm. Feel the suffering that comes from the hot burning fires of rage. See how anger reduces us to ignorant beasts that cannot see their way out of a situation.

Imagine your mind dominated by greed, always afraid of not having enough, always wanting more, always hoarding supplies for yourself, never satisfied with what you have. Or the state of mind beset by envy, forever jealous of what others have. Or the suffering that comes with pride, always separating yourself from others because you think you are better than they are, too proud to accept your own shortcomings. Or imagine the human realm of desire. Feel desire as an ache in your body, so intense you think you would die to have this desire fulfilled—maybe a desire for wealth, reputation, food, or sex, or a desire to have an expectation met, or a past glory replayed or restored.

Let's try to do this in meditation. I will talk you through the afflictive states of mind associated with each realm, but later on you can create your own examples to make the experience as vivid as possible.

Guided Meditation on the Suffering of the Six Realms

This includes the anger of the hell realm, the greed of the hungry ghost realm, the ignorance of the animal realm, the desire of the human realm, the jealousy of the demigod realm, and the pride of the god realm.

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight. Your eyes can be open or closed.
- Take a minute or two to rest in open awareness.
- Now imagine yourself in the hell realm. Remember that you are concerned with the afflictive states of mind associated with each realm. Here you want to connect with feelings of passionate, hot anger. The "hellish" quality that pervades this realm comes from the all-consuming quality of anger, which burns and tortures beings that get trapped in this inferno.
- Try to connect to this through a personal incident, one that might involve revenge or paranoid aggression.
- See if you can bring forth this emotion, and then drop the story line and just stay with the sensation. Bring your awareness to the sensation itself. Just feel it without judgment or interpretation. Stay with this for a few minutes.
- Now imagine yourself in the hungry ghost realm. Do you ever find yourself feeling that no matter what, you always want more? Even if you make a list of all the advantages in your life to convince yourself that your life is good, you are still beset by perpetual dissatisfaction and by feelings that you can never get what you want. You may use a story to connect with the emotion, but try not to get caught in the story. Stay with this for a few minutes.
- For the animal realm, you might return to the previous cow meditation and think: "Because of my ignorance, I do not understand my situation. Who are my friends and who are my enemies? Where is

my next meal coming from? I do not know how to improve my circumstances or to create advantages for myself." Stay with this for a few minutes.

- To connect with the affliction of the human realm, imagine something that you really desire and that you think will make you happy. Do you ever think, "If I just had a little more (fame, love, respect, sex, security), then I could turn my mind toward spiritual pursuits"? Try to connect to that gnawing sense of unease, of dissatisfaction with the way things are—even when they may actually be pretty good.
- Stay with the discomfort of the emotion, of wanting, of yearning, of never feeling that what you have is enough. Bring your awareness to this. Stay with this for a few minutes.
- Imagine yourself in the realm of the demigods. Do you ever find yourself wishing for someone's downfall? Or rejoicing in bad news when it affects a competitor's reputation or financial situation? It's like climbing a social or financial ladder, but pushing down the person behind you. You don't want to share the privileges of your god realm, but rather try to hoard them for yourself. Anyone else's success is a bitter pill to swallow. How does that feel?
- Try to connect to the ways that this emotion cuts you off from others, how isolated and suspicious it leaves you. Bring your awareness to that and stay with it for a few minutes.
- Imagine yourself in the god realm. Perhaps you think, "I have made such a wonderful life for myself. What great karma I must have. There is no longer any point in meditating since I'm already content with my life." There is no urgency to do anything meaningful. Everything exists in a kind of complacent stupor. The mind is dull, lulled into lethargy as if over-satiated by rich foods.
- Stay with the feelings that arise, and bring your awareness to your own arrogance and pride. Stay with this for a few minutes.
- Conclude with resting in open awareness.

The order of the realms is not important. The point is to recognize how our delusions and misperceptions create suffering for ourselves and others, and to accept that suffering pervades samsara, no matter

which way we turn, from the suffocating anger of hell to the complacent indulgence of the god realms. Yet once we know that we hold the key to the self-constructed cage of samsara, this recognition itself makes us less afraid to look at how we block our path to liberation. Denial turns into courage.

Meditating on the six realms changes how we relate to other beings. We see that everyone is stuck in samsara, just like us; everyone wants to be free, just like us. Once we connect with the undiluted anguish of the mental afflictions, the aspiration to free ourselves easily expands to others. However, don't expect too much at the beginning. The force of habit requires that we examine this again and again. We may feel a little happier from time to time, and that's wonderful. But situations may occur that pull us back into fabricated suffering and self-pity. This is normal and no reason for despair. Even one glimpse into the self-constructed nature of dukkha will help turn us in the direction of freedom.

Suffering and the Seeds of Renunciation

The suffering of samsara concludes the four thoughts. First, we recognized the preciousness of human life. Second, we concentrated on what most intensifies that, which is impermanence. Third, we looked at karma and how the ethical implications of our actions in daily life condition our future, even after we die. Death is not like a lamp that runs out of fuel. Even in this lifetime, karma creates the conditions for samsara. What is samsara? The fourth point: suffering.

To thoroughly recognize the suffering of samsara plants the seeds for renunciation. "I want to be free from all this suffering and be liberated from samsara. I wish to develop renunciation so that I can be free of my afflictions and liberate myself from this self-created prison. I want to renounce the destructive habits of mind so that I can liberate myself and benefit all beings." We are ready to make a commitment to turn away from dukkha and toward liberation, for the benefit of all sentient beings, including ourselves. "I want to do this. I vow; I commit. I aspire to do this; I wish for it to happen." But is this really possible?

The Buddha's Third Noble Truth: The Truth of Cessation

The Buddha's Third Noble Truth proclaims that the cessation of suffering is possible. This is the Buddha's best news, followed by the Fourth Noble Truth, which describes the path of practice, the dharma, the methods and means by which we realize the cessation of suffering. In my tradition, this path starts with ngondro, and at this stage, having used the four thoughts to turn our mind from samsara, we have arrived at the door of refuge which is the first practice of the unique ngondro.

But first we need to ask: Why did the Buddha proclaim the truth of cessation before introducing the path itself? He did so because we cannot progress on the path without tasting the truth of cessation, and this requires some understanding of emptiness. So yes, the end of suffering is possible, but without the recognition of emptiness, the path of dharma cannot lead to the end of suffering.

Emptiness and the Cessation of Suffering

With my father's story about mistaking a braided rope for a snake, I could understand how subjective perceptions distort reality for the worse. It was a good story for a little boy who had panic attacks and other self-created fears. Yet since it was my habit to imagine scary possibilities, I couldn't let the story end with its happy conclusion.

"Let's say," I said to my father, "you see that the rope is a rope and not a snake. But in the middle of the night, your enemy comes with a rope and tightens it around your neck. Then is it helpful to think that it's a snake or not?"

My father laughed and said that I was a smart little boy. This pleased me, but I continued thinking about a rope around my neck. So I asked again, "If I recognize the rope as a rope, will that help me?"

"No," my father said. "In this case, there's no benefit to knowing that the rope is a rope. When you imagined that the rope was a snake, you made a problem for yourself. If you had recognized that the rope was a rope, you would have eliminated the self-created snake. But now the

natural problem still exists. If someone is strangling you with a rope and you can't do anything about it, then you must accept impermanence and death. In order for this to happen without suffering, you need to learn the ultimate reality, which goes beyond a conventional way of looking at the rope. In the ultimate view, the rope is a manifestation of emptiness, you are a manifestation of emptiness, and death is a manifestation of emptiness."

"Can enlightened beings who understand emptiness get strangled?" I asked.

"To the average onlooker, someone getting strangled by a rope will definitely die. Even Milarepa would look like he is dying," my father told me. "But if this happened to Milarepa—in his own view and in his own experience—he would not die. Not in the conventional sense of a final death. He may experience change and transformation, but his perception of his own manifestation of emptiness would not lead to a final ending."

"If Milarepa was being strangled," I asked, "and he did not experience it as a final death, could you change the way ordinary people like me see him?"

"I can change my perception," my father explained. "But I cannot change your perception. When we die, our individual perception—which is associated with our current body—no longer exists, and people around us will see a corpse."

After this conversation, I attended many teachings with the nuns when my father talked about emptiness. But I still couldn't get past confusing emptiness with nothingness. Yet my father was always emphasizing that realizing emptiness led to everything wonderful, to buddhahood, enlightenment, and boundless compassion. Wow! You could be free! So emptiness just could not be nothing. Finally one morning I lingered behind in my father's small room until we were alone. "You said many things about emptiness," I told him, "but I did not understand."

He told me, "For emptiness, you need to know only two words: *empty* and *ness,* or *empty* and *possibility. Empty* and *ness* mean that the essentially empty quality of phenomena allows for all possibilities. Take anything that you identify as solid: a table, a car, a shoe, a rock,

even your own body. Whatever the object, we can break it down. And every part of that, we can further break down into pieces, fragments, atoms, particles, molecules. Whatever we are left with, we can break down again and again. In this way, every aspect of our experience is empty of any true, real, or inherent existence.

"Yet it is precisely this groundless nature of reality that allows for everything, for every kind of object and experience. Emptiness is not just a vacant nothingness. It's a field of infinite possibility. Because of emptiness, everything exists. Emptiness communicates the insubstantiality of our world while allowing for everything. Therefore emptiness is fullness as well, for it holds the potential for everything."

Then my father touched his hand to the table and said, "This has no inherent existence even though it appears as real. For example, let's say that in your dream, you touch a dream table. In your dream mind, it seems real: you can touch it, you can see it. It appears real, but it is not real. Seeing the table when you are awake and when you are asleep are the same."

Because of the empty quality of all phenomena, anything is possible. This is why it's so important to tie these words together: *empty* and *ness,* or *empty* and *possibility.* I understand that it can be awkward in English to always say "emptiness" rather than "empty." Yet many Westerners have the same confusion as I did about emptiness and nothingness. If we forget to add the dimension of "possibility," it's easy to mistake emptiness for nothingness.

Pointing to the butter lamp that he kept lit in his room at all times, my father said, "Empty and ness are like the flame and heat. They are naturally one and cannot be separated." The *Heart Sutra* says, "Emptiness is form, form is emptiness. Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form." It's like that. You cannot have one without the other. Nothingness would be without form. Emptiness is full of form. That's why we even say, 'Emptiness equals fullness.'"

Things are—and are not—what they appear to be. Objects of great density and weight, such as boulders, doors, or airplanes, demonstrate accumulations of very small pieces or particles that are themselves filled with space. We assign value and identity to everything we experience,

thinking that our limited perception is an accurate representation of the world, but these perceptions are just mental constructs empty of intrinsic value.

Habits of Perception

Differences in perception lead beings to see the same object in different ways: one person might perceive a lamp shade, whereas another might see a hat. One person might see a wooden form as a table, while another might see the same object as a casket, a throne, or a desk. No essential "table-ness" can be found, and therefore no identification invalidates these other descriptions. Furthermore, we know that wood does not hold its shape forever, that even as we stare at a table, it's changing form, dissolving, disintegrating, transforming, dying—however we describe it. The table is also compounded of millions of atoms, and we know that every atom is 99 percent empty, and the 1 percent left is 99 percent empty.

When my father was trying to teach me about emptiness, I had the same stubborn reaction that I first had to thought meditation: If I either think about things or use thoughts as support for meditation, I was still stuck with my stupid thoughts, so what difference did it make? Whether the table is emptiness or not, we are still looking at the same table, and I still could not put my hand through it. So what was the difference? I was still looking for changes in the objects, not in my own perception.

Then I asked my father, "If this table and the dream table are the same, how come when I bang my hand on this table, it hurts?"

My father said, "Habit. Your mind's habit prevents you from seeing the emptiness of the table, and until you can see it, the subjective perception of solidness will block your hand."

Of course it's easier to accept the idea of emptiness when we take a table for our example rather than our own body. Yet the changes in our own body and mind—from infancy to old age, from hunger to feeling full, from hair to baldness, from sickness to health, from anger to calm, from pride to shame—are the object of endless, moment-to-moment self-preoccupation. We stay fixated on our emotional and physical

changes, all the while insisting on our own essential "me-ness." What a paradox.

Buddhism and science agree on the impermanent, fluid nature of all phenomena. However, dharma explains the benefits of breaking our habits, so that the whole of reality can be revealed in order to bring about an end to suffering. The scientific tradition aims to know the truth. Buddhism does also, but the truth of reality that we seek is not an end to itself. We seek to know reality in its totality, because understanding that the world and everything in it, including ourselves, is not exactly as it appears opens the gates to liberation. The entire Buddhist tradition is dedicated to creating practices by which this goal can be accomplished. Only with this experiential understanding of ultimate reality can suffering be uprooted.

With my father's explanation about why I could not put my hand through the table, the lesson came to an end. In the following weeks, I had glimpses of clarity, but those faded fast, leaving my mind fuzzier than before. To add to my confusion, dreams now seemed like just more of this same nothing. So I asked my father to explain dream reality again. This time he chose an object that had been a big sore point.

Two years earlier, I had gone with my mother from Nagi Gompa down to the markets of Kathmandu. She was leaving the next day for her annual visit to her parents' village in Nubri, and she wanted to arrive with new kitchen utensils. I had started studying with my father, so I could no longer go to Nubri with her. In those days, the markets were not that big and most of the shops were close together. As my mother and I walked along, I spotted a kid's bicycle for sale. My eyes fastened onto this gleaming new bicycle, and I wanted it so badly. I asked my mother if she would buy it for me. She hesitated, so I began crying and saying, "I really, really want this bicycle." Finally she agreed, but when she opened her purse she did not have enough money. Then I cried some more. She said maybe we could come back and buy it another time, and she added, "Anyway, you are staying behind to take teachings from your father, and you will have a lot of work to do, so maybe you don't need a toy like that."

The next day my mother left for Nubri, but the bicycle stayed behind

Tsoknyi Rinpoche (left) and Mingyur Rinpoche
with their mother, circa 1980.

—in my mind. Then I had an idea, like a brainstorm. I went to my father and asked him if he would buy that bicycle for me. He said, "Sure, no problem," and he sent someone to Kathmandu. But the bicycle had already been sold. For days I was miserable.

When I asked my father to explain dream reality again, he said, "Let's say that in your dream, someone gives you a bicycle. This makes you very happy. You ride it everywhere and show it to your friends and wash the dust off to keep it shiny. Then the front wheel falls off. When you try to walk it to the repair shop, because of the imbalance the back wheel goes out of alignment, and when you try to make an adjustment with the handlebars, they fall apart, too. The whole thing just kind of falls to pieces, and you become very upset."

I told my father, "Yes, I may even cry in my dream."

My father said, "First the toy makes you very happy, but then it's gone. It doesn't exist anymore. But this dream bicycle was not real in the first place. In the dream, it made you very happy, and the dream was real. But at the same time, it was not real. *Empty* means that the bicycle is not real. *Ness* means that it is real in your dream."

I told my father, "Yes. I agree." And I did, sort of. I could sort of understand with my mind, but I sort of did not. I still could not see it or feel it.

The following year, I arrived at Sherab Ling with this same confusion. My father knew Saljay Rinpoche, and he had told me that Saljay Rinpoche was a great master and that I should request teachings from him. He also instructed my attendant to help me make a request for teachings in general, and in particular to request teachings on the Third Karmapa's Mahamudra prayer. The heart of this prayer is aspirations to realize emptiness and the nature of mind.

Saljay Rinpoche agreed to this. Each afternoon, five of us, all young monks, went to his room to receive these teachings. First he prepared for the reading of this special text by making many aspiration prayers. This took hours. Then he delivered these teachings very, very slowly. On day one, he talked a lot about emptiness. On day two, he talked a lot about emptiness. On day three . . . Once again, I thought, "What is the benefit of emptiness? I am hearing many great things about emptiness, that if you recognize it, you are free from samsara and have boundless wisdom and boundless compassion." But I just couldn't put it all together.

Then I went to Saljay Rinpoche and said, "You tell me that all phenomena come from mind, that the table is emptiness, that the cup is emptiness. What is the benefit? The cup's emptiness is the cup's business. The table's emptiness is the table's business. Yeah, I know that emptiness contributes to all kinds of wonderful Buddha qualities, but can you tell me something that I can understand?"

Saljay Rinpoche asked me, "Do you dream?"

I said, "Of course." And I was thinking, "Here we go again."

He said, "Say you are having a bad dream. A dream tiger is chasing after you, but you keep falling down and the tiger is getting closer. What is the best way to free yourself from your dream problem without waking up?"

I thought very hard because I really wanted to say the right answer. Finally, certain that I had it, I said, "Pray to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha!"

"In this case," said Saljay Rinpoche, "that won't help. The tiger will continue to come."

"I will run faster."

"The tiger can run faster than you."

For each answer I gave, he said, "No, that's not going to work."

Finally, without much confidence, I said, "Maybe recognize that the dream is a dream?"

"Yes, that's it," he said. "If you recognize that it's a dream, you can continue to dream and enjoy your dream, and you can continue to sleep. You can jump into the mouth of the tiger, ride on the back of the tiger, make friends with the tiger, anything. If you do not recognize that the dream is a dream, then that is what we call ignorance—perceiving phenomena as 'real' when they're not. As you practice emptiness again and again, slowly, slowly you will begin to change the habit of perceiving everything as real, and you will become capable of perceiving the relative and absolute levels of reality. Becoming a buddha means that you can perceive all aspects of reality."

"OK, the table is here, and I know this table is emptiness," I said. "But if I hit my hand on the table, it will hurt. In the dream, if I jump off the building, I will not die, but here my hand hurts. Why?"

Perhaps you can guess Saljay Rinpoche's answer: "Habit. The mind's habit will not allow you to see that both your hand and the table are emptiness. Since your hand seems solid and real, you don't see it as a mere projection of the mind, and the same thing happens with the table. Once you realize that your assumptions about the way things really are actually have no basis in reality, then the possibilities for what can happen become limitless. But this comes slowly, through practice."

"If you put your hand through the table," I asked Saljay Rinpoche, "will I see it?"

Saljay Rinpoche said, "No. Your habit will not allow you to see it. Essentially my hand is empty. The table too is empty. But if my empty hand goes through the empty table, your mind will only see a

solid object—my hand—coming into contact with another object—the table."

Whether or not you believe this is not important. And please do not practice dharma with the idea of performing miracles. What's important is to use a story like this creatively, to use it to inspire your investigations of reality. And keep in mind the end of suffering, which is the goal of your path.

Now you may ask: "How does a story like this help bring an end to suffering? Why is a tutor of the deepest wisdom talking about putting a hand through a table to a young monk? What was he really trying to teach me?" Saljay Rinpoche was trying to show me that all the Buddha's teachings are meant to help us to recognize the full experience of reality, and furthermore, to understand how this recognition leads to the end to suffering. But we cannot do that without knowing the nature of emptiness, and for that, meditation is our best tool.

The Three Stages of Meditating on Emptiness

We work with three stages of meditating on emptiness. This doesn't mean that our own experiences will necessarily follow this neat linear sequence; rather this is a teaching device that can be a helpful guideline.

The First Stage of Meditating on Emptiness

The first stage relies on intellectual deduction. We combine knowledge with modern scientific data or with those Buddhist texts that analyze mental processes. We use anything that helps demonstrate the reality of emptiness. Intellectual conviction will not shift our view, but it can clarify our target.

Examples of emptiness abound at our fingertips, but we are not used to identifying them as examples. A purple eggplant appears solid enough to be a lethal weapon. But place it in the oven, and it shrinks to half a cup of mush. Our own body appears substantial and firm, although water makes up about 70 percent of body mass. Find a fallen branch in the forest and analyze how the fibers create the appearance of density, when actually they're more like ten thousand toothpicks

stuck together. When we walk on the beach, we can take a moment to realize that the same tiny grains of sand under our feet make up stones, rocks, and boulders. We are surrounded with ordinary examples of compounded, temporary, conditioned forms. Look at how quickly the World Trade Center disappeared.

We can break down any object or any form, however big or small. We can take a particle of the new form and break it down again. We can break things down further and further without finding any essential element that defines the form in its current or previous state. That's the point: to see for ourselves that every form—conventionally perceived or broken up into pieces—has no essential identity. Every form is empty of self-contained meaning. The form's value and meaning come from our perception and do not exist within the form itself. This is why we say, "Form is emptiness." And because emptiness allows for all possibilities, we say, "Emptiness is form."

In order to use this information for our path, we must let go of our habitual approach to form and allow the recognition of emptiness to enter the equation. Then our task becomes how to stabilize this recognition for the benefit of ourselves and others. That comes with meditation.

The Second Stage of Meditating on Emptiness

The second stage of meditating on emptiness links insight with shamata meditation. Here emptiness becomes the object of our awareness. Let's say we have a table before us. Rather than using the "form" to support our awareness, we join awareness with impermanence and begin to accommodate the insubstantial elements of the table. We might imagine atoms that our eyes cannot detect, or we may imagine the table disintegrating because its wood is rotting, or burning like logs in a fire. Then what are we looking at? What appears when the form dissolves, changes, disappears? We might place a flower on the table and imagine looking at it through a time-lapse video where, say, the three-week life span of a tulip unfolds within three minutes. The purpose is to once again understand that our perceptions are conditioned by convention and by relative reality. We need to convince ourselves that our ordinary

perception is very limited. Investigations of change and impermanence can be accessible ways of challenging our habitual perceptions.

Yet change and impermanence make up only part of the story. I say this because when we scrutinize objects as they subtly change form, we might get the idea that, moment to moment, something really exists. But these things that arise so vividly in the present moment are themselves manifestations of emptiness.

With stage two, we begin to taste the shifting, fluid qualities of phenomena. If we casually glance at a tree on a windless day, it may appear still. If we steady our gaze, we might notice some very small movement, such as leaves being moved by the wings of a sparrow. Quite quickly we might experience the tree as animated, alive with movement. Or we can use a building as our support for shamata and imagine it disintegrating like an abandoned barn. Try to connect with the activity of change so that forms lose their solidity.

With normal awareness, looking at a house or a table tends to narrow the view. It becomes like tunnel vision, allowing for only a small part of the whole picture. When we meditate on emptiness, it's not that we drop into a void and experience nothing; what drops away is our clinging and fixation and the rigid beliefs we have about ourselves and the world around us. In other words, we start seeing things as they are, not as we think they are. We drop the preconceptions and ideas and imbued values, and just see. Tibetans say, "It's as if we take off our hat." We remove the layers of preconceptions and fixed ideas, and we experience reality free of those constraints.

When we become familiar with the delusion of solidity—as in a table—then the form tends to diminish in importance, which in turn helps break the bonds of clinging and attachment. Normally a table evokes a value-loaded response—good table or bad, beautiful or ugly, expensive or cheap. Our attention rushes out of the mind-body and into the object. When our attention inhabits the object, then subjective perception becomes the boss of the mind. This is what Saljay Rinpoche called the projector. The projector is the boss and we are just slaves to the projections, moving toward what we define as attractive and away

from what we find unattractive. But when we use emptiness as the support for awareness, then we become the boss of our perceptions. We no longer react to the forms that surround us in a manner dictated by perceptual habits and conventions.

Recognizing the emptiness of the table, the house, the pet, or the red convertible cuts right through the glue that normally makes our mind stick to the object itself. With this recognition, the object loses its assigned, fabricated value. We are no longer pushed around by the perception. Now, with mental composure, we are free to enjoy the qualities of the object. We can enjoy its color, shape, or smell without being thrown off balance by desire, judgment, or jealousy. Emptiness meditation is like looking in the mirror. What we see is very clear. But it's not real. It's impermanent, without substance or independence.

When Saljay Rinpoche was teaching me about the different realms, I got stuck on the notion that the hell realms and the buddha realms were mental constructs, while the human realm really did exist. One day I asked him, "If the Buddha's pure land is only a mental state, then it is just an idea. And if it is just an idea, then why do we make it into something real, with images and colors and special prayers? Why do we make it more solid? And what is even more confusing to me, why do we sometimes speak of it as something real, and at other times as a mental construct?"

Saljay Rinpoche asked me, "What do you think about my prayer wheel? Is it real or not?"

"Of course it's real," I told him.

"The buddha realm is like this prayer wheel," Saljay Rinpoche said.

"So that means that the buddha realm really exists out there?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"You are saying two opposite things at once," I told him.

Saljay Rinpoche replied, "Yes or no is normal. Black or white is normal. Actually this prayer wheel is both a mental construct and it exists."

"But I can touch this prayer wheel," I said. "You are touching it. When you twirl it around, it makes a noise. How can it be a mental state?"

Saljay Rinpoche said, "It is the same as a prayer wheel in a dream. If you have a prayer wheel in your dream, it does not really exist, but

you can still use it in the dream. Even this world is a mental construct. Even Saljay Rinpoche is a mental construct."

A prayer wheel, like a body—like Saljay Rinpoche's body—is a construction made of many parts. However many parts we see, we must go further. We do not stop with just a couple of pieces: an arm, a leg, or an organ. We keep going until we understand the emptiness of all phenomena. Because of this absolute emptiness, the reality of Saljay Rinpoche's form, as well as the prayer wheel and all other phenomena, can appear. But now we know that their "real" forms are characterized by emptiness and interdependence. We shift our view and bring it into alignment with reality as it really is, beyond conventional or contrived versions.

The Third Stage of Meditating on Emptiness

Direct realization defines the third stage of emptiness meditation. Now the senses are thoroughly infused with the wisdom of pure perception: uncontrived, naked, beyond all preconceptions. This direct experience is brought about through the practice of insight meditation.

Generally speaking, there are two forms of insight meditation. In one, we logically analyze a given topic, such as the belief that the self truly exists. We analyze the concept to see if it actually makes sense. Often we find that our ideas don't really hold up under scrutiny. Even from the point of view of their own logic, our ideas often unravel. Once we clear away the distorted views that crowd the mind, a direct experience of reality takes place that isn't filtered through the distorted lens of our beliefs and assumptions.

A second form of insight meditation, one widely practiced in the Mahamudra and Dzogchen lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, or what we call Tibetan Vajrayana, involves a direct examination of experience. In this kind of meditation, a simple question—such as "Is there anything in my experience that is stable and unchanging?"—leads to an inner exploration. We don't find our answer by logical thinking, but by directly observing our experience in the present moment.

Eventually this examination leads us to see things about ourselves that we were blind to before, and eventually to see the empty nature of all phenomena. At this point, the eyes continually see the union of

appearance and emptiness, the ears continually hear the union of sound and emptiness, touch continually feels the union of form and emptiness, and so forth. Directly experiencing emptiness in everything that we perceive eliminates the duality between relative and absolute reality. Samsara and nirvana become one indivisible reality.

The Good News of Cessation

The fact that I am suffering today does not mean I must suffer forever. The source for this possibility is emptiness itself. The essentially empty nature of all phenomena is what accounts for the possibility of change. If a building had an essential eternal quality, it would never fall down, but eventually it does. We know that. Same for ourselves: we grow up, we grow old, we die. This capacity for change allows us to transform our perceptions from ignorance to wisdom, and to transform our experiences from suffering to happiness.

Knowing that we can bring an end to suffering must be recognized before we enter the path, otherwise we don't know why we are doing what we are doing. Emptiness is like the fuel for our vehicle. If we get onto the road with no gas, our vehicle cannot take us anywhere. If we continue to hold tight to the confusion perpetuated by ego-fixation, concepts, and delusions about form and permanence, we cannot genuinely enter our path. The emptiness of all phenomena allows us to change, to let go, and to turn toward a reality of greater truth and clarity. Now we can begin the process of finding out who we really are and how the world really works.

The conventional view of how to end suffering generally relies on manipulating external circumstances. If someone—a family member, a boss, a neighbor—makes us angry, then we avoid that person; maybe we divorce, get a new job, or move. If an employee threatens our position, we might fire that person. If we don't like our house, we buy a new one. Yet circumstances "out there" are not the problem. Many harsh circumstances remain beyond our control, such as airplane crashes, wildfires, and earthquakes.

But unhappiness is not intrinsically bound to these circumstances.

The Buddha resolved his quest with the realization that dissatisfaction, self-created suffering, and even natural suffering arise in the mind. He discovered that we can expand our limited views beyond our emotions, thoughts, and memories to the pure awareness that underlies everything we experience. Once that happens, confusion and suffering can transform into wisdom and compassion. This is such a radical alternative to conventional views that it takes a while to digest.

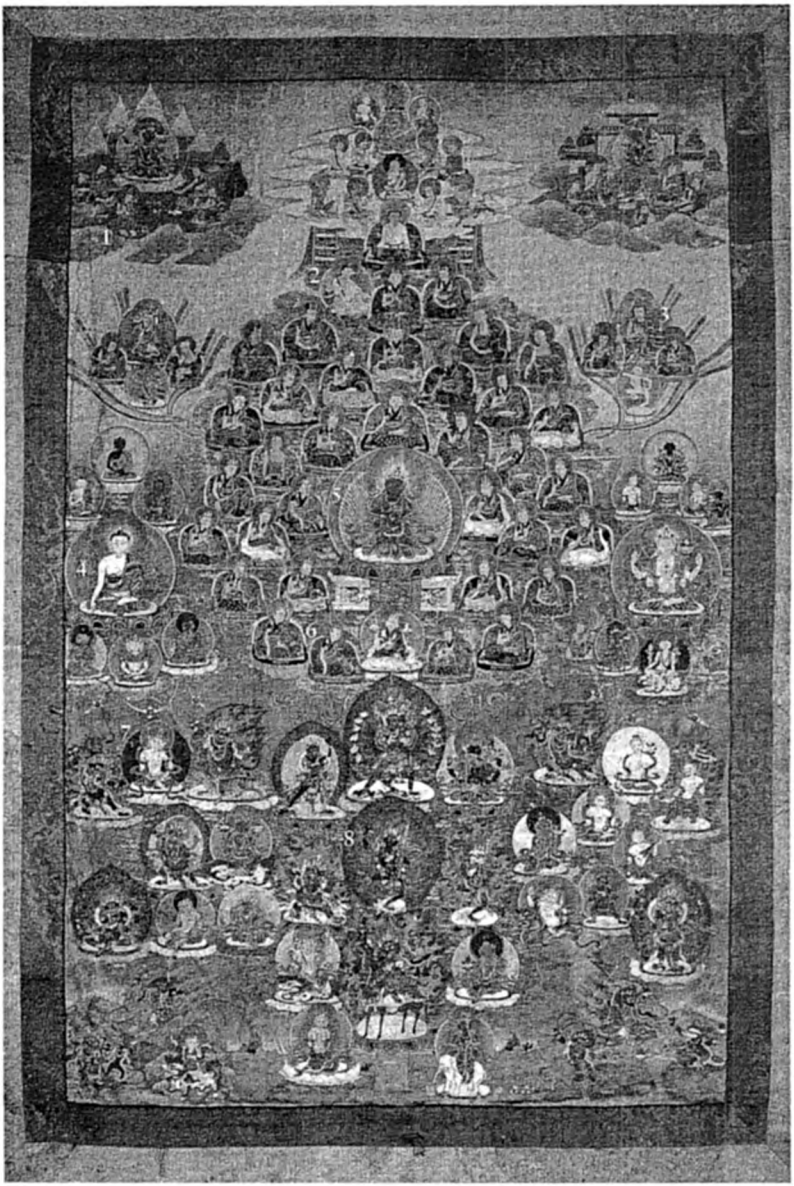
There's an old Buddhist tale about a man who travels the world with no shoes. To protect his feet, which have become bloody and tattered, he collects animal skins to cover his path, one patch at a time. Then one day he covers his own feet, and the surface of the whole world becomes smooth. Realizing the truth of emptiness cuts through all our confused projections at once, dismantling the foundations of suffering, and transforming samsara into nirvana. Not understanding emptiness resigns us to the hopeless task of pursuing comfort by trying to cover the whole world patch by patch.

Ngondro helps integrate the realization of emptiness with everything that manifests in our present-moment experience. However, most of the time when we cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, and devotion in the ngondro practices, we still function within relative, dualistic limits of "me." For example, "I" take refuge to help "others." But step-by-step, we move closer to an absolute view.

In the chapters that follow, we'll explore how refuge connects us to enlightenment, while bodhichitta helps loosen the fixations on our own needs and desires; how the Vajrasattva practice helps purify negativity, until we realize the purity of emptiness; how mandala practice allows us to give away everything, and gain more by seeing the infinite richness of our true nature; and how guru yoga lets us finally see ourselves and the world through the lens of pure perception. Ngondro takes us on a journey that leads back to ourselves, but we arrive home with a new sense of ourselves. Deepening our recognition of emptiness and recognizing our own buddha nature merge into one process.

Part Three

The Four Unique Foundation Practices



Refuge field, commonly called refuge tree, depicting all the main deities and historical figures of the Palpung Monastery in Eastern Tibet, seat of the Tai Situ Rinpoches.

8. The First Unique Practice

TAKING REFUGE

Part One

TAKING REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA, DHARMA, AND SANGHA

When we were little, my brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche and I pretended to be high lamas in imitation of our father and other lamas. That was our game, to sit on make-believe thrones, performing make-believe rituals with imaginary bells and drums, and chanting nonsense syllables. Buddhism seemed like everyday social activity, but only after taking refuge with Saljay Rinpoche at the beginning of my first long retreat did I have a feeling of coming home, a keen sense of belonging in dharma.

At that time I was far away from everyone I loved and who loved me, and I was a little homesick. Saljay Rinpoche told me, "Everyone is homesick because our true home is inside us, and until we recognize that, we will long for comfort outside ourselves. The issue is whether we set out for home on the right or wrong path. Taking refuge connects us to the right path."

Taking refuge is the first of the four unique foundation practices, also called the "inner" ngondro. The four thoughts—or the "outer" ngondro—investigate the habits that leave us spinning in delusion and dissatisfaction. We see that no matter what situation we're in—from the hells of anger to five-star resorts—that to truly bring an end to suffering, we must accept that relying on external phenomena doesn't

work. We must renounce our confused habitual patterns of relating to the phenomenal world. So now we have developed the conviction, motivation, and intention to bring suffering to an end, but we still don't have the means. We may identify our inherent nature as the source of lasting happiness, but until we stabilize the experience of our own basic goodness, this remains an intellectual construct without much benefit.

The inner ngondro provides means and methods for recognizing—or at least glimpsing—our own buddhahood. We are cleansing the mud off the diamond.

The Meaning of Refuge

Everyone takes refuge in something, so once again we work with transforming ordinary tendencies into skillful means for spiritual development. Everyone identifies relationships, locations, or activities that offer the body or mind a sense of security and protection. Even neurotic or unhealthy habits—like eating too much chocolate or giggling compulsively—can function as a protective shield to ward off feelings of anxiety or vulnerability.

Sometimes the sense of refuge only becomes obvious once it no longer exists or is threatened. For example, an American friend told me that on the morning of 9/11, she watched the first plane hit the World Trade Center on television. And then the second plane. The newscasters announced that it was a terrorist attack. Still she watched television calmly until they announced that the Pentagon had been attacked. Then she became scared and started crying. She told me, "For years every morning, I said 'I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.' But it turns out that I had also taken refuge in the Pentagon, in the military might of America and its power to protect me. Until 9/11, I never knew that I had relied on the Pentagon for protection."

Most of us hold in our heart and mind relationships or places that we identify as safe havens. Although these external refuges tend to disappoint us sooner or later, we acknowledge our conventional needs for security, because this identifies where we start our refuge practice. We connect with familiar feelings, but shift the focus. With dharma practice,

we take refuge in ourselves, in our own inherent capacity for happiness, for awakening, for instinctual concern for others. We take refuge in the steady, reliable mind of awareness.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, we use external images, concepts, and symbols to connect with our internal enlightened qualities. We take refuge in our own goodness, in our willingness to let go of ego-fixation and be of more help to others. The more we trust the reliability of internal resources to nurture lasting happiness, the more we decrease our dependency on unreliable phenomena. Eventually we dissolve the conceptual duality between external and internal, relative and absolute, the outside buddha and the inside buddha. But we start by acknowledging our conventional refuges.

Conventional Refuges

Let's start by asking, "Where do I look for happiness? Where do I seek security and comfort?" In love, in social status, or in the stock market? Our car may break down, our company may declare bankruptcy, or our partner may walk out. Our perfect health will surely deteriorate and a loved one will surely die. The stock market goes up and down; reputations go up and down; health, wealth, and relationships—all these samsaric refuges go up and down. When we place our trust in them, our mind goes up and down like flags flapping in the wind.

One Frenchman told me that his own Tibetan teacher had discouraged students from ordination. This really surprised me. He explained that his teacher had said, "Most Westerners who put on Buddhist robes take refuge in their robes, not in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha." I assured him that this was not limited to the West.

We live with a sense of lack that we long to fill. The monkey-mind habitually tries to merge with something—particularly another person—in order to alleviate our pervasive sense of insufficiency. Yet samsaric refuges are inherently impermanent, and if we rely on permanence where none exists in the first place, then feelings of betrayal and anger compound the loss.

Let's approach this concept of unreliable refuges through meditation.

Meditation on Unreliable Refuges

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Your eyes can be open or closed.
- Take a few minutes to sit in open awareness.
- Now bring to mind an ordinary object that you rely on as part of your daily routine, perhaps a refrigerator or a car. Make this object the support of shamata meditation.
- Now imagine that you are going to the refrigerator in the morning to get your organic orange juice, or you are going there at the end of the day to get a cold beer. Or be aware of getting into your car to drive to work or to drive your child to school. Stay with the awareness. Try not to get pulled into the story. But if you do, just come back to the awareness.
- See if you can connect to the assumptions that the object will be there, that it has not broken down or been stolen. See if you can identify the ways in which you have come to rely on this object and how you take it for granted. See if you can connect to the comfort offered by the familiarity of this object.
- Now imagine going toward your object, but discovering that it is not there. Investigate how you feel. If you get caught up in the story—say you find yourself ten minutes later still fantasizing that you are filing the police report for stolen goods—just try to come back to the feelings and allow your awareness to stay with the emotional reaction, whether it's strong anger, annoyance, confusion, despair, or anxiety.
- Conclude by resting in open awareness.

How did that feel? Were you able to notice your initial response to not having your expectations met? Emotions can also become habitual refuges. Responding with anger and self-righteousness and looking for something to blame can become a habitual place to hide. If anger reassures your identity, you may return to that state for shelter, the same way someone else returns to their home. Perhaps your habit is to become overwhelmed by confusion and to ask others to come to your

rescue. Chronic helplessness can be a refuge, a way of pulling back from the world and from your responsibilities. Before starting this practice, it would be quite helpful to know the refuges you depend on, because this examination might really inspire you to turn in another direction.

Taking refuge doesn't protect us from problems in the world. It doesn't shield us from war, famine, illness, accidents, and other difficulties. Rather it provides tools to transform obstacles into opportunities. We learn how to relate to difficulties in a new way, and this protects us from confusion and despair. Traffic jams do not disappear, but we might not respond by leaning on our horns or swearing. Illnesses may afflict us, but we might still greet the day with a joyful appreciation for being alive. Eventually we rely on the best parts of our being in order to protect ourselves from those neurotic tendencies that create dissatisfaction. This allows for living in the world with greater ease and without needing to withdraw into untrustworthy circumstances in order to feel protected.

Taking Fruition as Path

For the rest of ngondro, as well as for those practices following ngondro, our path affirms that waking up is within reach. To that end, we take fruition as the path. Enlightenment is the fruition of our path. Our goal is to recognize who we already are. Enlightenment is another way of speaking about buddhahood, realization, awakening, liberation—these are all verbal variations that describe our ultimate goal. We wish to wake up for the benefit of all sentient beings so that they too may realize their own awakened nature—and this includes ourselves.

From now on in our ngondro practice, we enter a context of enlightened beings, living gurus, and reliable sources of blessings. Most importantly, we enter this context with the recognition that in essence, we embody the same qualities as the buddhas. We no longer choose mundane or ordinary phenomena as objects of awareness. For example, we appreciated our human qualities by comparing ourselves to other beings, such as cows. Yet although cows have buddha nature, they do

not know it, they cannot recognize it, nor can they function from the place of realization. For these reasons, cows cannot offer the same benefit and blessings as enlightened beings. Therefore using the powers of imagination to bring forth a cow or to bring forth a buddha does not create an equally beneficial context for our practice. This is why we use the ordinary human instinct for intensifying our attention to extraordinary beings, and we imagine a refuge tree filled with beings that manifest extraordinary wisdom.

The term *enlightenment* has no inherent visual or verbal expressions, yet words and forms inspire our understanding. In the practice of taking refuge, we encounter Buddha Vajradhara—sky-blue in color. Sky itself is spacious, vast, unrestricted, limitless. This represents the absolute, which is the same as emptiness and the same as enlightenment. Every detail within the Vajradhara image—the ornaments, ritual objects, position of his legs and arms—is symbolic. Everything points to concepts that cannot be embodied by words or by images such as wisdom, compassion, or clarity. So we use symbols, rituals, colors, and so forth. We put them to work to expand the self-imposed limits of our universe. In Vajrayana, we use these images to access inherent qualities that have been buried beneath concepts and language, conventions and habits. We take the awakened state as the means of our path. We do not practice in order to become enlightened; we practice in order to recognize that we are already enlightened. Practice expresses the awakened self. However fantastical and extraordinary Tibetan images may seem, in every case they manifest hidden, unrecognized, or unrealized aspects of ourselves. Everything "out there" is "in here." The entire path is a shift in perception.

Outer and Inner Refuges

We work with two kinds of refuge: outer and inner. With outer or relative refuge, we see the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as being outside of ourselves. This duality definitely offers more reliability than conventional refuges, but with limited benefits. As long as the Buddha is somewhere other than in our own heart and mind, we won't see the true buddha—the empty clarity of our own pure awareness. The inner

refuge helps us to make the leap from the buddha outside to the inside buddha.

With inner or absolute refuge, the duality between outer and inner dissolves. Ultimately we rely on ourselves, on our own buddha nature, and on our own awakened qualities. Purification is the process of making these qualities become more accessible so that we can integrate them with our daily life. With practice, we recognize in ourselves the very buddha in whom we take refuge. This is the essence of practice.

Wanting to take refuge is itself an indication of buddha nature. We take refuge to be happier, to be free from suffering, and to feel more secure and stable. Why do we say that this wish itself reflects buddha nature? Because we never accept suffering as the normal or natural human condition. Whatever the degree of our unhappiness, this longing arises to be free of it. Where does this longing come from? How can we account for the intuitive knowledge that liberation from dukkha is possible? Our own intrinsic wisdom. Nothing else explains why we intuitively know that our unhappiness is off balance, that it's not our true self, and that it can be alleviated. Our buddha nature does that. It's like an internal compass that keeps our direction set toward contentment, no matter how much anguish or pain we endure.

Every being has this intuitive intelligence. Touch a worm and it recoils. That's a worm's wisdom. Every living thing, to some degree, has the wisdom of flight. Self-protection is a form of compassion. All beings want happiness; they do not want to suffer and do not want to die. These are the seeds of loving-kindness and compassion. When we cultivate compassion for all sentient beings, we include ourselves; we wish that all sentient beings may be protected from harm. If buddha nature did not exist, then what we identify as suffering would not exist. Suffering expresses our separation from buddha nature, and until we eliminate this divide, the suffering of a separate and incomplete "I" will remain.

Some people interpret "buddha nature" as a kind of object. It almost takes on the quality of material matter, and our metaphors might contribute to this misunderstanding. When we speak of buddha nature as a diamond or as an internal compass, it might sound like a physical organ, such as the heart or lungs. It's not like that. It's more like mustard oil

that thoroughly suffuses every particle of a mustard seed, but becomes evident only when the seed is pressed and the coarse matter eliminated. Yet the oil was never separate from the seed, nor did it occupy a specific location within the seed. We obtain oil through refinement, or we might say through purification, yet what we get was always there.

In the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, I Take Refuge

Taking refuge in the three jewels expresses the most basic, fundamental connection to Buddhism. Having confronted the limitations of samsara, we are ready for a change. We cannot renounce the temptations of samsara all at once, but this vow helps steady our intentions. It reminds us of what is true, what is real, both in the world and in ourselves.

Taking Refuge in the Buddha

The outer meaning of taking refuge in the Buddha refers to Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha who lived in India about twenty-six hundred years ago. We call him the awakened one, the one who has gone beyond all dualities and concepts, beyond all forms of confusion and suffering. His enlightenment and his teachings continue to inform all Buddhist schools and practices. Yet in whom did the Buddha himself take refuge? We know that the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana, sought protection in political power and social standing. We know that the king's attempts to keep his son bound to the householder life through sensory enticements did not work. Slipping past the palace guards, Siddhartha (his family name) embarked on the life of a seeker, taking refuge in forests and in caves, and with teachers who had mastered the practices of asceticism. But after six years, he rejected the austerities, as he had rejected his father's path, as well as the rituals of the ruling Brahman priesthood. When Siddhartha sat down under the *bodhi* tree, he took refuge in himself. Relying on instinct as well as years of training and experience, he abandoned every orthodoxy, determined to liberate his mind from the very roots of suffering.

It's important to use this model of self-reliance—and it's important not to misuse it. We cannot dismiss the Buddha's teachings in the name of creative autonomy, and we cannot just follow the Buddha like a baby duckling follows its mother. We neither discard genuine faith nor indulge in blind faith. But we draw on the ordinary human habit of placing trust in exceptional sources and use the Buddha—his teachings and example—to inspire us.

When we hear words of advice from someone that we hold in high esteem, such as a great scholar, a famous novelist, or a movie star, these words have a dramatic impact, whereas the same words spoken a hundred times by peers or parents might have no effect. The power of suggestion works this way. When someone that we identify as special speaks, we listen with heightened attention and trust. These natural tendencies initially direct our refuge practice. We use the images, words, and activities of enlightened beings to intensify our devotion and receptivity. With the enlightened beings before us, we bow and chant with more enthusiasm than if we imagine regular beings. We take refuge in the guidance and words of the Buddha, who embodies all enlightened beings. We use the outer buddha to take refuge in our inner buddha. But what identifies enlightened qualities?

The Three Boundless Qualities: Wisdom, Love and Compassion, and Enlightened Activity

The enlightened qualities that a buddha manifests are boundless wisdom, boundless love and compassion, and boundless enlightened activity. When we venerate the buddhas, we acknowledge and value their manifestation of enlightenment. The seeds of these qualities exist within us but we cultivate them through veneration and devotion.

Boundless Wisdom

Boundless wisdom has two aspects: relative and absolute. Absolute wisdom means the direct realization of the empty, illusory nature of all phenomena. Relative wisdom reminds us that the Buddha is not just "spacing out" in nirvana and thinking, "Everything is wonderful, no

one is suffering, there is no work for me to do." Relative wisdom means that the Buddha knows our relative reality; he knows our suffering, our neuroses and delusions, our confusions, concepts, and impure perceptions. *Boundless* here means that there is nothing beyond a buddha's perception.

Boundless Love and Compassion

This is like the immeasurable love that a mother has for her only child. She loves the child more than she loves herself. Limitless love. We are like the Buddha's child. Love and compassion can be limited by concepts but immeasurable, boundless love exists beyond concepts.

Boundless Enlightened Activity

This describes the limitless ways that the Buddha helps us. Yet every day, millions of people suffer from natural disasters, financial crises, romantic problems, monkey-mind problems, and it seems that the Buddha refuses to help. The Buddha himself said that a buddha could provide the perfect conditions for extinguishing dukkha by illuminating the path of dharma. But it's our responsibility to provide the causes for that to happen. That's why we practice. The buddhas are always available, but we are not always available to what they offer. They can open the door and shine the light, but if we don't walk through that door, we remain in darkness.

Taking Refuge in the Dharma

When I was a child, I heard my father talk often about the amazing qualities of the Buddha. One day I asked, "If the Buddha's so great, so wonderful and perfect, why can't he make sick people healthy? Why doesn't he just pick up the beggars in Kathmandu and toss them into the pure land?"

"Karma," my father answered. "Everyone has their own karma to work out. No one, not even the Buddha, can change our karma."

I continued to press my father, asking, "If the Buddha can't help people who are suffering, then why are all these people prostrating and chanting mantras and making offerings?"

"They are changing their own karma," he explained. "Only you can change your karma and make your karma. The Buddha cannot do that for you, but practicing dharma can. We pray to the Buddha, but even though the Buddha cannot change our karma, praying itself changes our karma. Seeing the enlightened qualities of the buddhas brings us closer to seeing those qualities in ourselves. In this way, practicing dharma becomes our active role in changing our own karma. Our sense of who we are begins to change."

To eliminate suffering, we need the supreme protector, which is dharma. It is dharma that can really save us from samsara. Only by following the path of dharma—which means practice—can we develop self-realization.

Taking Refuge in the Noble Sangha

There are two types of sangha: noble and ordinary. The noble sangha refers to the bodhisattvas, arhats, and other sages who have attained direct realization and hold the lineage of wisdom teachings. The ordinary sangha are members of our practice community. Both types play a critical role in our development, yet we take refuge only in the noble sangha.

While we are still in samsara it's important to take refuge in what goes beyond samsara, beyond ordinary. Ngondro is a process of envisioning a radically new way of living in the world. For this reason, we keep our orientation toward what we aspire to grow into. We need to make the stretch.

In general, people tend to minimize the importance of the ordinary sangha: Buddha is a big deal, Dharma is a big deal, and Sangha is something to put up with. Yet it's within the ordinary sangha, monastic or lay, that the roughest edges of our arrogance and pride can be smoothed down a little. Americans—with their car obsessions—have a good expression for this: "Where the rubber meets the road." Let's say there's a shiny new car on the floor. It appears to be perfect. But we still need to take it for a test-drive. The car that never leaves the shop is like a practitioner reciting nice words about compassion and selflessness, but removed from the opportunity to test-drive their intentions

and aspirations. How do the bodhisattva ideals hold up when we actually interact with others? Problems within the sangha inevitably arise because we're talking about unenlightened people trying to get along with each other. Jealousy, competition, and anger inevitably erupt. Although individual practitioners have unenlightened minds and commit unenlightened activities and get ensnared in ignorant understanding, the ordinary sangha still offers the best opportunity to apply dharma. We have shared ideals, shared goals, and we can turn to the lineage of teachers and texts for guidance. We should be able to hold a mirror up to each other in ways that others cannot.

Samsaric friendships are usually based on grasping. If another person can benefit us, then we try to befriend them. But if they become useless, we might try to distance ourselves. We are not really trying to see the genuine qualities of the other, only how we can take advantage of them. We see them in relation to ourselves. Within the sangha, we trust that dharmic values will prevail. This is no different than having faith in dharma.

Taking Refuge in the Three Roots: The Guru, the Yidams, and the Dharma Protectors

In Vajrayana practice, in addition to the three jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—we take refuge in what we call the three roots: the guru, the *yidam* (or meditation deity), and the dharma protectors. The guru is the root of blessings, the yidam is the root of accomplishment, and the protectors are the root of activity.

Taking Refuge in the Guru

The guru or teacher is of utmost importance because of the interdependent connection between the teacher and the disciple. The Buddha who lived thousands of years ago cannot guide us to our own buddhahood as effectively and expediently as the guru. The living teacher embodies the wisdom of the practice lineage and functions like a lit lamp that has the energetic power to ignite the mind of the student. If you make a connection, you will get lit, too. This is what we call transmission.

Transmission or blessing does not just come through formal rituals and ceremonies, or through words. If a teacher rests his or her mind in realization and teaches from that place, that quality of mind can be expressed and communicated, and can be transmitted to a student ready to receive it. Through the teacher's hand gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and so forth, the student can receive and begin to embody the view that the guru is transmitting. The living lineage comes through the teacher, not the historical Buddha. For the student, the teacher is kinder than the Buddha because he or she is the root cause of our spiritual maturation. Blessings come not only from the guru, but through the guru, who is perceived as a living buddha, as well as the prime vehicle for the dharma teachings and the noble sangha.

To recognize and use the benefits of the guru's blessings depends on our devotion. But we are not passive recipients like grass receiving rain. Devotion makes us receptive to all that the guru offers. Without devotion, we are like cups turned upside down, unable to take in anything.

For our refuge practice, the guru is understood to be our personal teacher or guide. The guru may also refer to the teacher who gave us the transmission for this particular practice. The conventional sense of guru as other—the teacher over there who teaches the student over here—is of utmost importance, because without this teacher, or what we call the outer guru, we might never hear the words of dharma. More profoundly, the outer guru puts us in touch with the inner guru, which is the natural wisdom of our original mind, which is what we ultimately take refuge in. It's the source of everything we normally think we are missing: peace and tranquility, insight and wisdom, compassion and empathy. Everything we long for, we already have. The outer guru is like the key, but when we open the door we discover ourselves, our true guru.

Taking Refuge in the Yidams

The meditation deities, or yidams, are the root of accomplishment. When we enter into a relationship with them, their enlightened qualities illuminate our very own, helping us accomplish our own realization.

Each yidam signifies a particular aspect of enlightened mind. For example, in the second unique foundation practice, we focus on the

meditation deity Vajrasattva to purify our negativities. If we are concentrating on compassion, we might invoke Chenrezik, also called Avalokiteshvara. Basically we use an archetypal projection of an enlightened quality to see ourselves reflected in that mirror. Having created a dualistic structure as a skillful means, we then grow into our enlightened projection.

In the last practice of ngondro, guru yoga, as well as in practices subsequent to ngondro, we eliminate the duality and inhabit the meditation deity in order to further deepen and clarify our inner qualities, and to experience ourselves as awakened in the present moment. At this stage of our practice, we start with the yidams in a dualistic sense by imagining them "over there" as part of the field of enlightened beings. Ultimately we come to see that the deity and the mind of the student have never been separated.

We refer to the yidams as symbolic forms of buddhahood because the imagery symbolizes and points to views that we use on our path. For example, the six arms of a particular yidam may represent the *paramitas,* the six "perfections" or virtuous behaviors that we need to cross over from samsara to nirvana: generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. Four legs might represent the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path of practice. One face represents *dharmakaya*—the oneness of all phenomena, no subject, no object, no duality, no samsara, no nirvana. Two arms represent wisdom and compassion. Two legs represent relative and absolute realities. When the legs are crossed, it represents the union of the relative and absolute.

The important point is that no matter how bizarre images with many heads, arms, or legs may appear—especially if you are unfamiliar with Tibetan images—these forms all have meaning. Furthermore, the meaning directly reflects qualities that you already embody. They are symbolic ways of mirroring your own realized mind. Remember, you are turning away from the refuges of samsara, toward the truest source of protection. What could be more reliable than your own buddha nature?

The yidams help us accomplish our goals by taking different forms,

which are categorized as peaceful, enriching, magnetizing, and wrathful. This diversity reflects the varying needs of practitioners. Think about parents who use different ways of loving and disciplining their children. If kind and peaceful behavior doesn't work, a parent might need to display anger. If a child runs out onto the road, the mother might raise her voice out of love and concern, or use punishment. For this reason, we have yidams that are associated with peaceful as well as wrathful activities.

Yidams also perform enriching activities. Say a child is rewarded for scholastic achievement, and the reward itself builds the child's confidence and capabilities; or a child is particularly helpful with housework and this behavior is affirmed through praise or a gift. Then we have the activity of power, or what we call magnetizing activity. This is the activity of inspiration. In Tibet, parents used to bring young children to see lamas in hopes of igniting their minds with the flame of inspiration. Parents often tell or read stories to their children about cultural heroes or great religious figures, with the idea that the children might be "magnetized" by beneficial behaviors or attainments. Out of boundless compassion, these deities manifest in any form necessary to guide beings in ways most appropriate for individual needs.

Taking Refuge in the Dharma Protectors

Dharma protectors are the root of activity. They are not quite completely realized buddhas, but more like the bodhisattvas of the noble sangha who genuinely aspire to help beings recognize their own enlightenment. Dharma protectors are like assistants, aides, or helpers. These protectors—or *dharmapalas* include a wide range of enlightened beings such as *dakas, dakinis,* and *mahakalas.* The protectors evolved as keepers of the dharma, or guardians of the Buddhist teachings. Worldly protectors are local deities or folk gods that people pray to for help with their crops or for the immediate environment to be protected from floods and storms. These are not enlightened beings and should not be confused with wisdom dharma protectors, who are bodhisattvas.

Traditionally we call dharma protectors "attendants," but modern

people associate "attendant" or "retinue" with displays of royal etiquette that seem outdated and perhaps even silly. Even though everything that we're talking about describes an emanation of mind, we don't need images or words that create more obstacles, so we should select language that helps rather than hinders us.

We may wish to see the king or president of our country for problems such as health reform or farmland taxation. We do not go to the head of state when our car breaks down or our computer crashes. For these kinds of problems we ask the helpers—attendants, aides, and members of our retinue such as siblings, cousins, and neighbors—to come to our rescue. We also turn to the dharma protectors to request help in removing obstacles to health and wealth, wisdom and compassion.

The Four Important Points of Practicing Refuge

For refuge practice we keep in mind four important points. The first is bodhichitta, which establishes our motivation. Every time we begin a practice session, we reaffirm our intentions, our motivations, and remember why we are practicing. Two, we must know the sources of refuge. Without this, we are just repeating words and making movements and sounds to no benefit. Three, we must know how to practice. Even though much of this material is abbreviated, it provides a taste of how the practice unfolds. The fourth important point is practicing free from hope and fear. It will take a while to get through the first three points, but once we do, the meaning of "practicing free of hope and fear" might be obvious.

The First Important Point: Bodhichitta Motivation

In our refuge prayer we say, "May the merit of my generosity and other virtuous deeds lead to buddhahood for the welfare of all beings." Why are we taking refuge? Not just for ourselves, but for all sentient beings. The intention to help all beings attain buddhahood expresses bodhichitta, the mind of enlightenment. The recognition that suffering arises

from false refuges motivates us to take refuge for all sentient beings, including ourselves. We wish to introduce all beings to their true refuge, which brings an end to suffering. A special section on bodhichitta follows this aspect of working with the symbols and meanings of the refuge tree because it is of such critical importance. For now, I want to say a few words on the significance of incorporating this aspiration within the practice of taking refuge. At the beginning of each practice session, we first check our motivation. We are not practicing to alleviate our own suffering or to attain our own enlightenment. We are not thinking that refuge will benefit only ourselves, but that it will benefit all sentient beings. This identifies our motivation. Bodhichitta is not ordinary compassion. It refers specifically to the commitment—to the intention—to help all beings become enlightened. We do not just passively "wish" for everyone's enlightenment; we actively, intentionally, energetically work on behalf of this ultimate goal. This reflects ultimate or pure compassion because it aspires to the ultimate liberation, which is nothing short of enlightenment. When we recite the vow "to benefit all sentient beings," we also commit ourselves to transform these words into activity.

Let's say that we work on behalf of educating prisoners, so that upon release inmates possess skills that help prevent them from returning to prison. We have identified our work as compassionate action, and we wish to see the prisoners thrive in their post-prison lives. But for what benefit? For them to be released back into the ordinary suffering of confusion and ignorance? Of course not. We might continue the same work, but shift the intention: "I want to help these prisoners so that they may encounter circumstances for spiritual nourishment that will lead them to ultimate liberation."

Here, as with so much in dharma studies, we have a win-win situation: the more we aspire to help enlighten others, the more we develop our own bodhichitta, which itself dismantles the conditions that keep us stuck in samsara. It's like a bottomless wishing well: the more we wish to help others, the greater our aspiration becomes, and the more energy we have for helpful activities. The more we free ourselves from the prison of ego-fixation, the more we can genuinely help others. Anything

that helps release ego-fixation is the greatest gift, since ego lies at the very root of suffering.

Since we are not enlightened, we cannot have 100 percent bodhichitta. But 50 percent is OK. Ten percent is OK. Actually 0 percent is fine. Just having the intention to respond to sentient beings with the pure heart of bodhichitta is wonderful. But 0 percent is the intention. Zero percent is better than just a little, say 1 or 2 percent, because 0 is free from hope and fear.

When I was young, I thought, "OK, I can learn about emptiness. I can learn about impermanence. But bodhichitta? Forget about it. Bodhichitta is such an enormous responsibility! So vast and strong. To aspire to be a buddha to benefit all sentient beings!" It was too big an idea for me. Too big a commitment. Emptiness and impermanence are not exactly small ideas, but they did not require the kind of responsibility associated with bodhichitta. I did not feel big enough for this big responsibility.

At that time I did not understand that helping sentient beings experience the end of suffering is actually the main motivation for our own efforts to cross over from confusion to clarity. And I could not relate to this until I accepted that it was another step-by-step process. Then it became workable and less overwhelming. I began to understand that although my capacities were limited, my intention could become boundless.

The Second Important Point: Knowing the Qualities of the Sources of Refuge

We covered this in our discussion about the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and the guru, yidams, and dharma protectors. The essential qualities to keep in mind are boundless wisdom, boundless love and compassion, and boundless enlightened activities.

The Third Important Point: How to Do the Practice

Begin in a seated position with a good strong posture. Sit with your eyes open or closed, and take a few minutes to rest in open awareness. When

your mind and body feel a little settled, begin to imagine the objects of refuge. I will describe this, but you may also find it useful to place an image of a refuge tree on your shrine. Nowadays, many students have these images on their computers.

Imagining the Refuge Tree

Imagine a beautiful landscape, a gorgeous, pure land. It could be on top of the world, or among green valleys, or on a romantic island such as Tahiti. Then apply this atmosphere of a perfected paradise to your imagined vision of the refuge tree. Within this atmosphere, imagine a pristine, clear, blue lake, smooth and transparent as glass. From the middle of this lake grows the five-branch wish-fulfilling tree.

Exquisite, colorful birds delight your eyes. With the ears of imagination, you enjoy their melodies. Your sense of smell enjoys the fragrance of blossoming flowers. The caress of a breeze soothes your skin. Use imagination to heighten sense pleasures, and then steady your awareness on them. This is shamata meditation with a mental object.

Now bring your awareness to the lake and to the wish-fulfilling tree. Its strong trunk (which is considered one of the five branches) continues to the very top, with four main branches stretching from the trunk toward the four directions. Each branch is filled with leaves, fruits, and precious gems, which together fill the entire sky. The lower leaves form a lush canopy. Many enlightened beings—your sources of refuge—rest on each branch.

Imagining the Six Sources of Refuge: The Three Jewels and the Three Roots

Start constructing the sources of refuge with the root guru, who you imagine as Vajradhara, with the understanding that he embodies all enlightened beings. Vajradhara, the primary figure, sits in the center of the refuge tree. Below Vajradhara, and on a smaller scale, are the second source of refuge: the yidams. Then circle to the right of Vajradhara and imagine the third source of refuge, Shakyamuni Buddha. On the branch behind Vajradhara are stacks of books, symbolizing the dharma, the fourth source. For the fifth source, the noble sangha, imagine the assembly of arhats and bodhisattvas through history, and

for the last source, imagine the dharma protectors under the canopy of the lower branches.

The First Source of Refuge: Guru Vajradhara

In the middle of the refuge tree, set into the trunk itself, Vajradhara sits on a royal throne supported by eight snow lions. Upon the throne is a seat made of a flat, full-moon disk, which symbolizes compassion. The sun disk under that symbolizes wisdom. A lotus flower encircles these disks, with the point of each petal facing upward. The lotus flower appears often in Tibetan imagery to represent the Buddha's enlightened activities: the roots of the lotus remain in mud, but the flowers rise above the water, pure and spotless, in the same way that buddhas appear in samsara to benefit beings but are not stained by samsara.

Guru Vajradhara—or Buddha Vajradhara—embodies your own lineage teachers as well as your root, or main, guru. (Within different Tibetan traditions, this central figure may change, and even depictions of Vajradhara may have slight variations, but generally the refuge practice remains the same.) An individual may have one root teacher or a number of teachers. All these teachers are identical in essence and therefore manifest in the single form of Vajradhara.

Vajradhara is deep blue. This color represents the emptiness quality of sky-like mind, which we also speak of as dharmakaya—or ultimate reality, which is emptiness. Sky represents the absolute quality of all phenomena, free from concepts, free from subject and object, boundless, undivided, unfabricated, just like space itself. His arms cross at his chest, right over left, signifying the union of wisdom and compassion. In his right hand he holds a golden vajra, symbol of skillful means or compassionate action, and in his left hand a silver bell, symbol of wisdom and emptiness. What recognizes emptiness? Wisdom. And compassion arises from clarity.

Emptiness and wisdom may first strike us as two unrelated qualities. Yet once we recognize emptiness, the recognition itself is wisdom; therefore the duality dissolves. The union of wisdom and compassion is represented by the crossed arms. The single face of Vajradhara means that there is no separation between samsara and nirvana, and no dif-

Vajradhara, the primordial Buddha in the Kagyu lineage.

ference between oneself and others. His head bends slightly to the left. With a tranquil gaze and a faint smile, Vajradhara sits with legs crossed in the full-lotus posture. His legs represent absolute and relative realities. Being crossed signifies the ultimate inseparability of relative and absolute, or of samsara and nirvana. Six ornaments adorn Vajradhara: two earrings, a bracelet, two necklaces, and an armband. These represent the paramitas, practices used by bodhisattvas to cross from samsara to nirvana.

Every aspect of the refuge tree has symbolic meaning. Learning the meaning of the symbols can definitely enrich the practice. Yet at first it's almost impossible to imagine every detail of the refuge tree. If you try to create the perfect image, your mind might become so tight that your efforts leave you exhausted and frustrated. Know the general meaning; know that the enlightened beings mirror a pure manifestation of

yourself. Allow the essential pictorial aspects to weave the different forms together but don't become too rigid about the details. Over and over, both my father and Saljay Rinpoche stressed the importance of allowing the presence of the enlightened beings to infuse the practice without getting hung up on the particulars.

The lineage masters appear in three different versions. In the most condensed version, Vajradhara sits alone, but embodies the union of everything, including all the recent and ancient masters of the lineage. His form embodies emptiness; therefore, like sky, it embodies everything. In particular, Vajradhara embodies union with your own gurus. They are one and the same.

In the medium version, all the masters of the lineage appear one above the other, in a kind of column above Vajradhara's head; or this same grouping of lineage masters is imagined as a gathering of beings, more in the shape of a tree than a column. A second image of Vajradhara sits at the very top of this column or gathering in order to identify him as the source of the Mahamudra lineage, the primordial Buddha Vajradhara. In between these two Vajradharas, there can be as many as forty masters, who you picture in their human form, more or less. But remember all these forms are like reflections in a mirror, pure appearance with no solidity, like the moon's reflection in a lake.

In the most elaborate version of the refuge tree, the column of our own lineage masters is surrounded by the main masters and gurus of all the other Tibetan lineages.

Remember that however many living guides you have, Vajradhara embodies them all and that you do not need one personal guru to practice Vajrayana. You can receive various transmissions for particular practices from different authentic teachers. This describes a perfectly valid style of practicing.

Another style of practice is that you choose one particular guru to whom you return for guidance and transmissions and so forth. You can also have more than one root guru. In my own case, I have four root gurus.

A third method of connecting to a guru is what we call automatic style. When your diamonds are covered with mud, you need someone

to point out that they are really diamonds. Whichever teacher gives you pointing-out instructions, whoever introduces you to the nature of your own mind—which involves your recognition of the nature of your own mind—then he or she automatically becomes your teacher, or among your most revered teachers.

Whatever style you choose, or wherever you are in the process of connecting to living teachers, Buddha Vajradhara takes center stage because he embodies the buddha qualities of the lineage and the living gurus.

If you do not have 100 percent devotion to your teacher, or perfect faith in your teacher, or pure perception of your teacher, then it's better not to imagine your teacher's ordinary form, because that's not what you take refuge in. The wisdom mind of the teacher is your teacher; the teachings of the teacher are your teacher. These are not ordinary aspects, and if you imagine an ordinary form, it will become confusing. By seeing the enlightened qualities of the teacher, we are better able to see our own enlightened qualities. And so we imagine that Vajradhara embodies the essence of our teacher. The idea is to reinforce the true meaning of what you take refuge in. The Buddha said that the teacher is like a flower, the student is like a bee, and the dharma is the nectar. You take the nectar, but do not get attached to the flower. Once you receive the teachings, they become the teacher.

The Second Source: The Yidam Deities

If you are looking at a lineage-tree image, the yidam deities are directly below Vajradhara. We already described the many forms that the yidam deities take. In many of the refuge-tree images in my own Kagyu lineage, the yidams are in union, or what we call *yab-yum*. The appearance of sexual union symbolizes the intrinsic inseparability of form and emptiness. Contrary to ordinary appearance, the *yab-yum* image does not represent two deities that cojoin, but rather one deity manifesting as two. The single deity represents absolute reality; the separation into two figures represents relative reality.

Dharmakaya Yidams are the enlightened manifestations of dharmakaya, which is the uncontrived, unbounded, sky-like spaciousness

represented by Vadjradhara. Dharmakaya has no form, no location, no color, no beginning. It is unborn and therefore has no ending, no edges, no limits. It manifests the emptiness-wisdom aspect, vast and inconceivable.

Kaya means "body," but no phenomenon is less embodied than sky, or than dharmakaya. So we don't mean "body" in the sense of a container, like a bag or a vase, but rather as a "body of thought," or a grouping or gathering together of related qualities. Even though Vajradhara has a humanlike deity form, he represents formlessness. From dharmakaya-Vajradhara arise all the other enlightened forms of the yidams, which we call sambhogakaya. This term means the "body of perfect enjoyment."

Sambhogakaya This radiant clarity aspect of sambhogakaya buddhahood manifests in Tibetan imagery as rainbow forms. These deities are not flesh and blood, but transparent displays of light and color similar to holography. Sambhogakaya differs from dharmakaya in that it's a subtle form of embodiment, which manifests to help sentient beings. For those beings who have purified their negativities and reached a high level of realization, sambhogakaya beings become part of their universe, just as you and I are part of each other's universe.

Nirmanakaya Nirmana beings are the next source of refuge. The Sanskrit term *nirmana* refers to form itself and is exemplified by Shakyamuni Buddha. The special quality of nirmanakaya beings is that their form can be easily recognized by regular beings like us. They manifest buddhahood in a relative or conventional form.

The three *kayas* are never actually separate from each other. The emptiness aspect is dharmakaya, the clarity aspect is sambhogakaya, and the union of emptiness and clarity is nirmanakaya. The appearance of differences exists for our benefit. For now, it is convenient to speak of "three" bodies, but this shifts with practice.

Another way of understanding the three kayas is to regard them as stages of the path. First we connect with nirmanakaya; when we achieve

more realization, we see sambhogakaya; and by the end, we realize dharmakaya—we realize our own wisdom mind. Ultimately we recognize the complete inseparability of all three.

The Third Source: Shakyamuni Buddha

On the branch to the right of Buddha Vajradhara sits Buddha Shakyamuni, surrounded by one thousand buddhas who represent the infinite buddhas of the ten directions and the three times. Sometimes Shakyamuni Buddha sits in the center of nine buddhas, which together signify the ten directions. These buddhas represent embodied emanations of human manifestations of buddhahood or nirmanakaya—enlightened beings that appear in the world in order to help sentient beings.

The Fourth Source: The Dharma

Behind the assembly of buddhas, on the branch that is the farthest away from us as we imagine the refuge tree, is the dharma, represented by a mound of texts. These sacred scriptures have been written in the best gold ink and wrapped in fine embroidered cloth. The square-shaped ends of these rectangular books face the viewer. A flap of cloth hangs over the end of each book. On each flap is a Sanskrit letter, which represents a particular sound. Both the letters themselves as well as the sounds are considered sacred emanations of the dharma. Since you have taken imagination as path, imagine listening to the vibration of the entire collection of texts as it hums the teachings, which are then disseminated through space like prayer flags sending blessings with the wind.

The Fifth Source: The Noble Sangha

To Vajradhara's left sits the noble sangha, represented by Shakyamuni Buddha's main disciples. These include Shariputra and Maudgalyayana, as well as Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant. These are joined with the great Mahayana bodhisattvas such as Chenrezik, the bodhisattva of compassion. Remember that you are taking refuge in the community of realized beings.

The Sixth Source: The Dharma Protectors

The dharma protectors are imagined as embodiments or expressions of enlightened awareness. Under the canopy of branches, below the throne, numerous protector deities—male and female, peaceful and wrathful—ride through space on layers of clouds, wind, and fire. They stand on sun disks encircled by lotus flowers, often with their right foot raised and their left foot on the body of a corpse, signifying the triumph of compassion and wisdom over ego and ignorance.

Imagining the Field of All Sentient Beings

You begin refuge practice in the seven-point posture, or as close to it as you can get. Then you start to imagine the refuge tree with the lake, the tree, the five branches, and the six sources of refuge. Most importantly, use your imagination to invoke the presence of the enlightened beings. You aspire to do this practice in the presence of the buddhas.

Now you begin reading the ngondro liturgy. There are many versions, with varying lengths and complexity, and a selection can be made with the help of your ngondro guide.

When you have stabilized the refuge-tree image, prepare to make full prostrations in its direction. Stand erect with your feet close together, and bring your palms together at the center of your chest.

In addition to the refuge tree before you, imagine a vast assembly of all sentient beings who make each prostration with you, the most important being your father, who stands to your right, and your mother, who stands to your left. If a parent has passed away, you still imagine that person. Orphans imagine someone as close to a parental figure as possible.

Immediately in front of you, also facing the refuge tree, stand your enemies. These are people you have quarreled with, or you feel betrayed by, or those who have hurt you or a family member physically or emotionally.

Behind you are close friends, siblings, sangha members, cousins, coworkers, and so forth. Behind your friends are all sentient beings.

That's a lot to imagine! Perhaps think of this field as a kind of huge orchestra. You conjure up the whole with great clarity, but don't see

any individual distinctly. You are the conductor who leads all beings together in venerating the sources of refuge through body, speech, and mind. When you bow, everyone bows—parents, friends, enemies, and all sentient beings.

The vast field of all samsaric beings provides a powerful catalyst for your motivation. If you do not venerate the sources of refuge, no one does. You must do this for others, no matter how lazy or resistant you may feel. This field also functions to remind you that samsaric refuges are not reliable. Even your parents, your most reliable source for many years, are here in deference to the true sources of refuge. The same is true for your friends, relatives, and others to whom you have turned for physical or emotional protection. Nor can any of these unreliable sources protect you from your enemies. Your only true protection comes from an internal shift in perception, and that comes from practice.

Once you have stabilized, to some extent, the image of the refuge tree and the surrounding fields, then begin your prostrations.

At this point, you are trying to imagine: a perfected realm with a pristine lake and a refuge tree; all six sources of refuge; your parents, your enemies, your friends, and all sentient beings! Before you decide that this is simply impossible, it might help to say a few words about imagination practice, because actually this is quite a common obstacle in ngondro.

Imagination Practice

In the same way that taking refuge draws on the human need to attach to something outside of ourselves for protection, Vajrayana draws on ordinary human reliance on imagination. The more commonly used term *visualization* tends to be associated with esoteric practices. Yet we are simply talking about the human habit of imagination, which we rely on to help negotiate all our activities. The difference between secular and religious usage is not in the process of imagination, but only in application. In Vajrayana, we use imagination in service of our spiritual development.

To plan a vacation, we may imagine golden-domed cathedrals in European capitals or sandy beaches in Thailand. Pictorial displays

may pass through our mind as if switching television channels, helping us select a destination. We may think that something "real" out there exists—the places we wish to visit—but we know that the images in our mind are not real. The details of the refuge—the branches, the fruits, the jewels, the lineage masters, the lake, and so forth—are also not real. These details do not take on the quality of density or substance, but remain transparent and fluid. The imagination-mind remains very relaxed, not rigid and uptight.

So how does imagination help cultivate our awareness? What can we learn about buddha nature by working with imagination rather than sitting on the couch daydreaming? Here we deliberately bring forth specific images. The details help tether our mind to the awareness that we are creating this vision. Images are not just floating in and out of our mind like shopping lists or conversations that we have had or are planning to have. Creating the image and then stabilizing it requires mental effort. This actually creates a big obstacle for students approaching imagination practices: they make too much effort. Let me explain this with an exercise.

Imagination: A Three-Part Exercise

1. Please sit comfortably and try to recall the room that you spent the most amount of time in as a child. Pick a place that you think of fondly. For now, just remember the details of this room. Picture the furniture, the walls, the colors, maybe a rug and the windows. Imagine the space in between the furniture. Just take a minute or two to remember this room in as much detail as you can. Then stop thinking about your room.
2. Now I'd like to ask you to take a meditation posture.
   - Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
   - Your eyes can be open or closed.
   - Take two or three minutes to rest in open awareness.
   - Now recall your childhood room again. Use the details of this room as support for shamata meditation. Meditate on the qualities of the room. Be aware of the bed, the color of the bedspread,

the color of the walls, any photos or posters on the walls, the kind of window, maybe curtains or blinds, and use these memories to steady your awareness for one or two minutes.

- Allow for the awareness to shift from the objects to awareness itself.
- Conclude by resting in open awareness for a minute.

3. Now for the third part: this is a very special, very important meditation.
   - Keep your spine straight and relaxed.
   - Only think of your childhood room, nothing else. No other thoughts. Don't think of pizza or partners. Don't move your mind from this room to the kitchen or to the living room. Even within the room, do not move from the bed to the closet, or from the floor to the ceiling. Don't scan. Whatever you imagine first, stay there and steady your awareness for one minute. Keep your awareness steady.
   - Conclude by resting in open awareness.

Of these three exercises, which is the easiest: (1) remembering your childhood room, (2) using these memories to steady your awareness meditation, or (3) the special meditation? When I ask my students this question, almost everyone says that the first one is the easiest, the second is a little harder, and the last is the most difficult. Why? Because with each step, the mind becomes tighter and tighter. At first you think: I can remember my room, no problem, that's easy. But when you are told that this is special and very important, and that your mind cannot wander, then the effort becomes very self-conscious and strenuous.

When you imagine the refuge tree, use the first style of remembering your room. Relax. Very clear is fine; not very clear is also fine. It doesn't matter. Just invoke the living presence of the deities. Bring your memory of a refuge tree to mind and place the deities in their correct location on the tree. After that, don't worry about the details. Slowly, the details will become increasingly clear through doing the practice itself, so don't worry about it.

The general image that you hold helps your mind not to stray and helps you to pay attention to the process of creating a universe. At the end you dissolve this same universe. You bring it forth; you let it go. You have projected the union of form and emptiness onto your mind's movie screen, and you allow the form to dissolve back into emptiness, just as you did with the childhood-room exercise. If you understand the projection as the union of form and emptiness, then you have introduced the element of wisdom to your meditation and we call this meditation *vipashyana.*

Vipashyana

Vipashyana comes into play by applying a relaxed mind to an insubstantial image and using this experience to recognize the emptiness of the form we have created. We use the formal structure of sitting, visualization, and so forth to nurture our awareness of this process. But actually it's a description of how reality works, and the more we align our experience with this reality, the more we function from a place of realization.

Using Symbols

People often ask whether these many details and symbols are necessary to our spiritual development or merely some cultural quirk peculiar to Tibetans.

The meaning of dharma comes down to buddha nature. Everything comes down to buddha nature. Buddha nature is beyond form and concepts, beyond details and cultural symbols. But we need a way to approach buddha nature and to explain what cannot be explained. Practically speaking, we need a path, a context, and guidance. When we practice ngondro, it will not help to say, "Since buddha nature is beyond words and concepts, etc. I will do whatever I want." In Vajrayana, we use symbolic imagery as the path, and so even though buddha nature transcends all the details, the details are not arbitrary.

Symbols already shape our everyday reality. Previously I mentioned how this path transforms conventional tendencies into gateways for liberation, such as the ordinary need for protection or confession. The

same applies to symbols. Take the national flag of the United States, France, Brazil, or any country. What do we actually have? A piece of cloth that hangs on a pole, or from hooks, is or displayed inside a government building, or stuck into the side of a mountain, or reproduced as an image in a book. When used as a victory banner, or in tribute to a fallen hero, or at a time of national crisis, this symbol becomes a powerful stimulus for the emotional expression of millions of people. Its very appearance has the power to make grown people weep with joy and sorrow. It works the same way with dharma symbols. For those new to Tibetan Buddhism, certain symbols may appear exotic or even weird. However, while the symbols themselves may not be familiar, the reliance on symbols is quite ordinary.

Making Prostrations

As I said earlier, with refuge, as with many other Vajrayana practices, you use your body, speech, and mind, although the activity of full prostrations puts the emphasis on the body. You are now standing before your refuge tree within a field of all sentient beings. Now cup your palms together at your heart like a lotus flower just about to open, not pressed flat. The thumbs can be outside the palms or folded inside.

As you begin the refuge prayer, in Tibetan or in your own language, raise your cupped hands to the top of your forehead, which represents the body. This confuses Westerners because they always point to their heads to indicate "mind." But Tibetans identify the head with the body because it contains the sensory systems.

The Tibetan word for prostration means "purifying" (*chak*) and "receiving" (*tsal*). With each prostration, at each of the three gates—forehead, throat, and heart—negativities are replaced with blessings. With your hands at the top of your forehead, imagine that you are purifying any illness of the body that obstructs or impedes your spiritual path, or interferes with your happiness on a physical level. The karmic causes and conditions for these problems are being dissolved and replaced by blessings that pertain to the enlightened form or body of the buddhas.

Next bring your cupped palms to your throat to purify negative

speech—gossip, slander, harsh words, blame—any speech that causes obstacles or suffering that interferes with your spiritual development. All of that is being swept away at the same time that you receive blessings associated with the enlightened speech of the enlightened beings.

Now bring your hands to your heart center and think that this purifies the negativities of mind that obstruct your spiritual path, and that with this gesture you receive the blessings and the qualities of the enlightened mind of all the buddhas. In Tibetan understanding, heart and mind are one, not two. Thinking and feeling are unified. Mental processes provide the surface layer of understanding, while beneath those lay the feelings, discernment, and emotional information associated with the wisdom of the heart.

Next bend your knees, bring your hands down to the floor on either side of you and slide them out in front until they cannot go any farther, and touch your forehead to the floor. The five points touching the floor—the head, hands, and knees—represent ignorance, anger, pride, desire, jealousy. You imagine these poisons dissolving so that their counterparts, the five aspects of the Buddha's wisdom or awareness, can begin to develop.

From the prostrate position, bring your hands together again in the prayer gesture and raise them over your head; then bring them to your sides and slide back as you raise your upper legs to return to a standing position. Last, bring your cupped hands to your heart. This completes one prostration, which should correspond to one recitation of the refuge prayer. How many prostrations you do in any one session will depend on many factors and can be discussed with your ngondro guide.

I started prostration practice when I still lived at Nagi Gompa. I began with about three hundred prostrations an hour. At first I felt inspired to complete the traditional 111,000 prostrations, but my muscles became sore and I lost my motivation. I told my father that I wanted to do Vajrasattva practice. He said, "OK, no problem." As soon as he gave me permission to stop prostrations, I continued doing them.

To make things easier on your body, you can roll up a blanket or a mat, and place it where your knees land, or you can wrap your hands in cloth or socks, or wear mittens to protect them from getting blisters.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, Nagi Gompa,
Nepal, circa 1990.

Nowadays, instead of using a mala to track the number of repetitions, many people prefer small hand counters, which can be held without interfering with the movements. How many prostrations you do in total, or how many you do during any one session, depends on many factors and can be worked out with your own ngondro guide.

Sometimes, due to advanced age or an affliction, prostrations are not possible. If you are doing ngondro for the first time and cannot make full-body prostrations, then do the recitations from a seated position on a chair or meditation cushion.

In my lineage, the traditional instructions for ngondro require 111,000 repetitions of both the prostration and the vow. Depending on the teacher or lineage, this number may vary. Some teachers require a short ngondro of 10,000 repetitions before they proceed to subsequent practices, including the long ngondro, and some contemporary teachers are experimenting with time requirements rather than the traditional number of recitations.

If the student becomes preoccupied with counting, it will be difficult

to realize the benefit of so many repetitions. Yet the first prostration that you make is not the same as the second, and it is not the same as the fifty thousandth. Each one, done with genuine motivation, conditions the mind so the next one is of greater benefit. The prostration works with the interdependence of body, speech, and mind. You bring these three aspects together to purify the mind. It can take a while to completely integrate these aspects so that the process itself generates increased benefit. But without genuine motivation, without bodhichitta, you can do a million prostrations without much benefit.

No physical form more completely embodies the quality of surrender than a full-body prostration, which suggests an apparent contradiction: you create true, reliable sources of safety and protection by repeating a physical gesture of utmost vulnerability. Yet who are you bowing to? If you think that the buddhas and deities exist outside of you, then bowing might feel like deference to rank, like saluting a military officer. But from the ultimate view, we do not surrender ourselves to others, but to the best aspects of ourselves.

Ending the Practice Session

After each session of refuge practice—whether you do ten prostrations, one hundred, or one thousand—it's very important to end with the dissolution of the objects of refuge. Most texts will describe this as something like: "Melting into light, the objects of refuge and their blessings dissolve into me." This might take a minute or two. We connect with the felt sensation without getting hung up on the details.

Each of the ngondro practices ends with the melting together of the practitioner and the buddhas and deities. This is not a mere afterthought; it is of critical importance to the Vajrayana view. Without this merging, you remain bowing, praying, and making prostrations to enlightened beings outside yourself; you are on the floor, as low as you can get, and they are up there in the clouds above the Himalayas. Yet the driving force of Vajrayana works to eliminate this divide, not solidify it. To imagine this merging helps stabilize our understanding that we are inherently, essentially not separate from the buddhas, and

that veneration, surrender, and obeisance activate attitudes that exist for our benefit, not for the benefit of the buddhas.

This ending also offers critical lessons about how the mind works. First, we deliberately engage in creating an elaborate reality with many deities, clouds, jewels, a lake, and so forth. Then we dissolve everything we created. We bring it forth; let it go. With awareness, we begin to see that this is exactly what we do in daily life.

It is really important to remember to close the practice session properly. If you regularly forget this part, you miss one of the most effective ways of realizing your own buddhahood.

The Fourth Important Point: Practicing Free of Hope and Fear

Now that we have covered the first key points related to taking refuge—motivation, the sources of refuge, and how to actually do the practice—we can turn our attention to the fourth and final key point, which concerns the attitude that we bring to the practice.

Taking refuge is our first experience with a fairly elaborate visual field, and it demands strenuous physical labor, which tends to set us up for very high expectations. We generate high hopes for the results of our practice, and we fear that we may not attain them. Furthermore, expectations turn us toward the future, which is a big distraction from the present moment.

Samsaric sources of refuge always come with grasping and attachment. We hope that impermanent things will last forever. We fear change, the inevitable constant of life. We place our emotional, physical, and financial investments in situations that are as insubstantial as sand castles.

When you begin to practice, you might have some hope about how much dharma can help you: perhaps illness will disappear, a marriage can be rescued, your devotion will win the lottery, or you will soon be enlightened. The main point here is to relax. If you receive benefits, great. If you don't receive benefits, great. "Am I doing it right, am I

doing it wrong?" Just relax your mind. There is no perfect way, so don't worry about it. When you begin the refuge practice, it's almost impossible to hold every detail of the refuge tree in your mind's eye, so you do the best you can, and remember that nothing is more important than motivation.

Alternating Meditation Techniques

Throughout ngondro most of us experience dullness or agitation. This is quite normal. Whenever I developed resistance to a particular practice or became bored or restless, both my father and Saljay Rinpoche always encouraged me to change meditation techniques. They taught all their students this way, so this isn't about making dharma easier for modern people.

We'll go over several different ways to do this. If your practice session lasts for a couple of hours, then you may want to alternate techniques within the session when you feel your energy diminish. Or you may want to choose one technique and stick with it for a particular part of the practice, or commit to a specific time period. The important thing is to keep practicing, but not to misuse these alternatives to jump around like a monkey.

Contemplating the Practice

While seated before your shrine, as well as when you begin making prostrations and reciting the refuge prayer, contemplate what you are doing and why you are doing it. This is not a logical, coherent discourse that we have with ourselves, but rather a softer type of analysis—more like thinking with the heart. We hold the image of the refuge tree in our mind, but even as we recite the prayer, we reflect on our activity with more personal language, such as, "I am going to take refuge and accept the Buddha as my teacher, the Dharma as my path, and the Sangha as my spiritual companions, so that from now on I may become awakened to help all beings become awakened." Or, you may address your guru in the form of Vajradhara.

We also invoke the bodhichitta commitment, which sets our intention. We are not doing this for ourselves alone. We feel the presence of the field of beings around us, knowing that everyone prostrates when we do. But our focus stays in front of us on the refuge tree and primarily on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, or simply on Vajradhara as the embodiment of all enlightened beings and sources.

This generates the basic orientation of refuge practice. We start each session this way. But if dullness or agitation settles in your mind then initiate one of the techniques that we have discussed: shamata with object; shamata without object; loving-kindness, compassion, bodhichitta, or vipashyana. I'll review these again, this time in the context of refuge and bodhichitta.

Shamata with Support

We'll start by discussing shamata with object—or with support. The refuge tree can support our recognition of awareness, or we can use a particular figure or grouping within the refuge tree. The sound of the recitation or the sensations of bodily movement can also support our awareness. Or we can use the movements of our hands at the three gates (forehead, throat, and heart). If your body starts to hurt, you can use pain to support your meditation. All these options are shamata with object—using an object to support resting your mind in awareness. Placing your awareness on the object, whatever the object is, makes the object the support for awareness practice.

Shamata without Object, or Open Awareness

Even without holding the image too tightly, imagining the refuge tree can still become tiring or boring. Don't get stuck in the visualization or attached to the idea that you must do it, and then become dull or agitated and annoyed, and stand there thinking, "Today I must imagine that refuge tree, and tomorrow I must imagine that refuge tree, and the next day I must imagine that refuge tree."

In the event of this kind of problem, both my father and Saljay

Rinpoche always encouraged students to continue the prostrations and recitations but to drop the visualization. Many ngondro practitioners assume that the refuge-tree image must be maintained continuously. But you can practice shamata without object—resting in open awareness—while doing the prostrations and repeating the vow. This is fine.

To do this, simply rest your mind naturally without focusing on anything in particular, yet without getting distracted. Remain present in an open, spacious way. You don't even need to meditate. Just relax your mind without getting lost in thoughts and memories.

If you received pointing-out instructions on the nature of mind, then resting in open awareness will naturally become linked with the Mahamudra and Dzogchen traditions of practices that directly reveal the nature of awareness. This approach is just the same. The only difference is that your meditation will have the flavor of pure awareness as you rest naturally when you do the practice.

Prostrations with open awareness are especially good for practicing meditation in daily life. It's difficult to apply sitting shamata to daily life, because normally when we walk down the street, we allow our monkey-mind to walk with us, just like a pet dog. With prostration practice, we can gain some skill in maintaining mental stability while performing physical activity.

Loving-Kindness, Compassion, and Bodhichitta

Another option is to drop the refuge tree image and repeat the recitations and prostrations while embodying the aspirations of loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta. With loving-kindness, we aspire for all beings to be happy; with compassion we aspire for all beings to be free from suffering; and with bodhichitta we aspire to help all beings recognize their own buddhahood. We keep our attention on arousing loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta. Without creating specific images, we direct our aspirations to the buddhas, asking them to help all sentient beings to become enlightened. This is our silent aspiration, while our speech simultaneously recites the refuge prayer. We

cannot ask for anything greater for ourselves or others than to become liberated.

Even if you drop the deity imagery, you can still maintain a sense of the field around you, with your enemies in front, your parents to the sides, your friends and family behind, and surrounded by all sentient beings. This all-inclusive assembly promotes unbiased compassion. You are not picking and choosing, selecting particular individuals to be the object of your kindness, the way we all do in ordinary life. With each bow, you imagine that limitless compassion, undiluted by personal preferences, arises from your heart and radiates over the entire field, with no more concern for where it lands than the sun has for its rays. Friends, family, and enemies are equal recipients of your love, equally worthy of your kindness.

With this technique, we drop the visualization and keep doing prostrations and recitations. At the same time, we ask ourselves, "Who is taking refuge with whom? Buddha is emptiness, I am emptiness, the refuge tree is emptiness. There is no one taking refuge. There is no refuge. There is no object of refuge." Then we just relax and rest in the illusory experience of taking refuge. This is the ultimate form of refuge, in which we take refuge in our own ultimate form, our own true nature, which is nothing but emptiness.

The very best way to take refuge in our buddha nature is to realize that the whole concept of someone taking refuge in something else is not the ultimate truth, not the ultimate description of what is taking place. None of these things has any self-nature. The person taking refuge, the object of refuge, and the act of taking refuge do not exist in and of themselves. To see this from an absolute perspective offers the best way to take refuge. This experience becomes like a dream. Everything looks real, but is actually empty. This is the emptiness of taking refuge in ultimate reality, which is emptiness. This goes far beyond the ordinary framework of someone relying on something else. So the best kind of reliance, we might say, is reliance in which no one relies on anything.

Elaborate images combined with displays of reverence and veneration can have the effect of seducing the practitioner into believing that

these phenomena are "real," that they actually have substance and are not just emanations of mind. We can easily forget that these practices and rituals are constructed as skillful means to help us. That is why circling back to emptiness is so important. But we cannot discard the form. We must start where we are and with what we know: form, image, sound, movement. So first we use these conventional manifestations of relative reality, and then we can practice with emptiness.

After a few days or weeks, or even in one session, you can switch your approach if you get really bored or agitated, or if the practice begins to feel dry and lifeless. You don't have to do them in any particular sequence. You can move from shamata without object to loving-kindness to vipashyana. With each change, you may feel refreshed. You may think, "Oh, I really like this technique better than that one." But soon the dullness and agitation start all over again. That's OK. Don't try to figure out which technique works best, because the cycle of feeling initially refreshed followed by boredom repeats itself with each one. Yet they all support each other. This is really important because so many practitioners think that visualization—not meditation—is the critical ingredient of ngondro practice. What's important is keeping the mind steady, not scattered. If the focus itself changes, that's OK.

In general, the instruction here is to change styles when boredom takes over. But even in the beginning, one style should be held for at least five minutes. Then as you continue, try to lengthen the time for maintaining whatever style you chose.

Encountering Difficulties

All dharma practices present difficulties. Turning our mind from confusion to clarity is not an easy process, and although we may extoll the benefits of dharma, we may still meet the practice with resistance, or unrealistic expectations. Or, we may yield to disappointment. In a monastic setting, it is pretty obvious that everyone is experiencing these trials, but if you are practicing at home or not living in a dharma community, you may conclude that you alone are having problems

with practice. For this reason, it is helpful to know that there are very common difficulties that most students encounter.

Don't Concentrate Too Hard

Holding a more complete sense of all the many styles of the practice helps offset the tendency to concentrate too hard. Tibetans have an expression for how the mind narrows through concentration: "When we think of the head, we lose the feet; when we see the feet, we lose the head." The idea is to hold a general image, and even allow for fluidity and movement. The whole scene may become fuzzy or wavy. Don't think, "Oh, this is incorrect, I must concentrate harder." These distortions are fine. Actually they are a good sign, because they indicate an active awareness.

Often when we first try to imagine the refuge tree, our mind goes blank. Completely blank. Nothing. That's what happened to me when I practiced this for the first time. I could not imagine anything. The harder I tried, the more it felt like sitting in the driver's seat and pushing the gas pedal and the brake at the same time: grrrrrrrrrrrrrgh. When I explained this to my father, he told me, "No problem. That's normal. The most important thing is to feel that the buddhas are here. If you cannot imagine all the forms and colors, it doesn't matter."

Ugly Buddhas and Really Ugly Buddhas

After I decided to give prostrations another try, I thought that placing an image in my room in front of me might be helpful. My father had several refuge-tree images, but these could not be removed from the shrines at Nagi Gompa. One day I went to visit an old monk who lived in a hermitage nearby and who collected images. He took out many photographs of buddhas and deities until he found one of the refuge tree. It was crumpled and creased, but I took it back to my room and placed it before me when I practiced. Yet all I saw were these crumpled buddhas and distorted deities. I showed the photograph to my father

and told him, "First I have no connection to the visualization and my mind goes blank, and now I got this bad photograph and I see these ugly buddhas! What should I do?"

"No problem. Just imagine ugly buddhas," my father said.

His answer really surprised me. I had assumed that an ugly buddha needed to be transformed into something beautiful—and as quickly as possible. So then I imagined an ugly buddha. I did not try to get rid of it or change it. Soon my buddha became very beautiful.

This lasted for several weeks, so I told my father, "Now I can imagine the refuge tree."

He said, "Don't be proud. One day you will not be able to do it again. Don't get attached."

I nodded as if I knew just what he meant but actually I believed I had the secret to this practice and would encounter no further problems.

Sure enough, all the images soon became fuzzy and crooked. After a few more weeks, the images changed again. This time they did not just become ugly, but grotesque: deformed buddhas with distorted and bizarre faces, twisted noses, and misshapen mouths. Really hideous. Again I asked my father what to do.

My father told me to imagine an ugly buddha statue, really ugly, with spiders and insects crawling up its nose and coming out of its ears and eyes, and with pigeons on its head and with their poop running down the buddha's face. I was shocked to hear this. I just stood there staring at my father with my eyes wide open, trying to figure out if he was joking or not. But he did not laugh, and he stopped talking. So I left, figuring that I had better follow his advice. After a few days the buddha in my mind became very beautiful again.

I discovered that, in an expression of grasping, I had become very attached to a perfect, clear, beautiful image. My father was trying to break this attachment to both grasping and to perfectionism. He was trying to teach me that what I wanted was only attainable once I let go of wanting it so much, and to show me the benefits of letting go of grasping. I also learned that when I could not construct the mental image, to simply practice shamata without an object, and sometimes the image would just appear effortlessly.

The Fear of Not Finishing

Many of my students complain about this practice. Mostly this arises with a preoccupation about finishing prostrations because they can take a long time. Even for a dedicated lay student, they can take several years. My advice is: If you have an aversion to prostrations, use aversion to support your awareness. If you are anxious about finishing, use anxiety to support your awareness. Remember that we apply awareness to all practices, and eventually to all activities. And we benefit most by working with our mind, in whatever unenlightened state it is in—which means working with aversion and anxiety, pain and frustration, hope and fear. If you have made a commitment to this practice, and now find that you do not like it, work with that. No problem.

Buy One, Get Five Free

With refuge practice, we cultivate protection in the reliable sources of the three jewels and the three roots. That's what we sign up for. But we receive many other benefits: shamata; loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta; vipashyana; purification; and merit.

Don't forget that here we are engaged in meditation practice. The main point of the entire practice is to recognize our own awareness and to nurture it. Imagination is a wonderful support for that. In the context of taking refuge, we can rest our awareness on the refuge tree or, as I explained earlier, we can use physical sensations, the sound of the prayer, or even awareness itself as a support.

Once we set bodhichitta as our motivation, we accumulate merit and virtue through our aspiration to help all beings become enlightened. There is no greater aspiration than this. But we do not just "aspire." Our own intentions are limited by our delusions; if we are seriously committed to helping others, we must practice so that our capacities, capabilities, and enlightened qualities can have the most beneficial effect.

The refuge tree has been created by our mind. It sits in space without solidity, without substance—the union of form and emptiness. However elaborate, however colorful, and however filled with symbolic meaning,

the form remains translucent and insubstantial. When we use vipashyana meditation for this practice, we maintain our awareness of the illusory nature of experience, of the fact that all phenomena that appear to our mind lack any true, solid reality. This cultivates wisdom—which is insight into the absolute nature of emptiness, and which is our very own nature as well.

We bring our body, mind, and speech together for the purification of negativities and obscurations, which we emphasize through the physical act of making prostrations. This works to dissolve the bad karma that we have created through activities of body, speech, and mind.

We accumulate merit by our intention to help all beings to the ultimate end of suffering. We also generate merit by venerating the enlightened beings, which helps dissolve negativities and obscurations for ourselves and others.

Conclusion of Refuge

By the end of the common foundation practices, we aspired to be free from suffering but we didn't have a clear sense of our destination. Once we make a connection to reliable sources of protection, our destination comes into view. We begin to discover the missing piece in our pursuit of happiness, which had eluded us because samsaric refuges do not last.

This connection to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is not like a rigid, concrete bridge that connects one side of the river to the other and is designed to last for a thousand years. It's more like an enchanted rope that slowly but inevitably draws the two shores closer together until they merge, until we realize that samsara is nirvana; and that the outside buddha and the inside buddha are the same.

Part Two

TAKING REFUGE FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL BEINGS

Bodhichitta

The vow to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha until enlightenment is attained for oneself continues with the vow to help all beings attain enlightenment. "May the merit of my generosity and other virtuous deeds lead to buddhahood for the benefit of all beings." Merging our personal aspirations with the field of all beings expresses bodhichitta. In Sanskrit, *chitta* means "mind," and *bodhi* means "enlightenment." The general meaning translates into "enlightened mind" or "awakened mind."

We may think of benefiting all beings in terms of charitable donations, alleviating world hunger or homelessness, or eliminating AIDS or river blindness. These honorable efforts express genuine concern for others, but the ultimate end of suffering remains out of reach because the benefits depend on circumstances and conditions. And since circumstances and conditions are inherently impermanent, they cannot offer lasting liberation. The true end to suffering only comes with buddhahood, which exists independent of circumstances.

Bodhichitta automatically includes all forms of love and compassion, but not all forms of love and compassion include bodhichitta. Among my own students, I hear *bodhichitta* and *compassion* used interchangeably. They are not the same, and it's important to clarify the difference. To do this, I want to introduce "the four immeasurables." These form the basis of bodhichitta and clarify its distinction from compassion.

The Four Immeasurables

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.
May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering.
May all beings never be parted from the sublime bliss free from suffering.
May all beings rest in equanimity free from attachment and aversion to those near and far.

The wish for all beings to have happiness and the causes of happiness expresses loving-kindness. The wish for all beings to be free from suffering and the causes of suffering expresses compassion. Sublime joy refers to the wish for all beings to cultivate the capacity to rejoice in the well-being and success of others. The fourth immeasurable refers to equanimity, the wish that beings not be controlled by their aversions and attractions. Equanimity allows the aspirations for immeasurable loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy to ripen into an absolutely impartial and all-inclusive expression.

These aspirations are pretty straightforward. Yet the concept of "immeasurable" can be confounding. Immeasurable refers to all beings: all humans, insects, birds, fish, animals. The numbers are boundless therefore the motivation must be boundless. How is this possible?

Look at His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The problems with China are immense; his responsibilities to the Tibetan communities in India and around the world are immense; his commitments as a world leader, a peace advocate, a spiritual teacher, and a lineage holder are immense. Given his situation, he asks himself, "Why am I so happy?" His answer is, "Because of loving-kindness and compassion. That is what gives me energy and keeps me active and fearless. This increases my capability and allows me to do more."

The more we do, the more we are capable of doing. If we just sit on a chair and think about this concept, it's unworkable. But once we sincerely engage in working for the welfare of others, then the concept falls away and we remain sustained by the energy of love and compassion.

How do we cultivate vast, boundless, immeasurable love? Through practice and investigation and starting with ourselves. We cannot jump directly into genuine immeasurability. Impossible. We begin with our conventional understanding and personal experience. So we apply each aspiration first to ourselves, and then to people we know. After that, we work with immeasurable aspirations, and that leads to bodhichitta.

The first step is to recognize that the seeds of love and compassion are with us all the time. All beings—ourselves included— constantly look for happiness and try to avoid suffering. This desire for happiness arises from the root of love; the wish to be free from suffering forms the

basis for compassion. Even in our darkest moments, these wholesome impulses underlie our behavior.

Take an improbable example: self-hatred. Self-hatred can be an excruciating state of mind. But if we investigate the situation we might see that such anguish is often fueled by comparing oneself to others who are identified as being better, smarter, or more attractive. Yet buried beneath these destructive comparisons is the desire for happiness, and the wish to be free from the entrapment of feeling wretched. Love and compassion are always present. Once we recognize them, then we can take responsibility for nurturing ourselves.

Sadly the news is filled with stories about people trying to find happiness in ways that bring suffering to themselves and others. A man might kill his wife, convinced that he would be happier without her. A woman embezzles from her company, imagining that the stolen money will improve her circumstances. These people remain ignorant of the law of cause and effect. This is why we not only wish for all beings to have happiness, but also the causes of happiness, the wish that happiness will not be pursued by causing harm.

Preparation Practices for The Four Immeasurables

We prepare for the boundless aspect that defines the immeasurables, by applying the same aspirations to ourselves and to beings that we know.

1. May I have happiness and the causes of happiness.
2. May someone (be specific) I love have happiness and the causes of happiness.
3. May someone whom I feel neutral about have happiness and the causes of happiness.
4. May someone I actively dislike have happiness and the causes of happiness.

Next we apply the wish to be free from suffering to the same four categories (oneself, someone we love, someone we feel neutral about, and someone we dislike). This wish both reflects and cultivates compassion. *May I be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.*

For the next four exercises, we continue with sympathetic joy: *May I never be parted from the sublime joy free of suffering.*

For the last four exercises, we work with equanimity: *May I rest in equanimity free from aversion and attraction to those near and far.*

In each case, we start with ourselves in order to confirm the truth of this feeling through our own experience. Then we expand this aspiration to someone we love, then someone about whom we feel neutral, and finally to someone that we dislike.

Let's begin by trying to recognize how much we want to be happy. Perhaps we think that meditation itself will make us happy. "Why am I doing this? Why am I interested in meditation or in dharma?"

Our answer may be: "It will make me a nicer person, it will make me less angry, I will be more patient; I want to learn to relax, to be less uptight about my work, or to have more friends."

Our ideas of happiness vary infinitely. Some people load up backpacks and go hiking in the mountains for fun. Some people carry heavy loads all day for work, and the idea of walking around with a heavy bag for fun might seem crazy. The point is to recognize how much our everyday activities are driven by moving toward our preconceptions of physical and emotional comfort and by moving away from discomfort, aversion, and dissatisfaction. What do we seek when we switch from a wooden chair to a soft couch? Or when we plan our weekend activities, invest our money, or support a political candidate?

Once we recognize how much our activities come from subtly or overtly seeking happiness then we bring our mind to the first aspiration and apply it ourselves: *May I have happiness and the causes of happiness.* Don't try to combine this with compassion. It's too difficult right now. Separate loving-kindness—the desire for happiness—from feeling compassion for yourself and others who are suffering. Practice them one by one, even though they are two sides of the same coin. It's as if there are two views of one flame: one focuses on heat, and the other on illumination. At the beginning, we learn more by looking at each view separately.

The seeds of loving-kindness, which orient us toward happiness, already exist within us, so we are not calling this feeling forth from the

outside. Yet we may not have recognized how much our behavior is dictated by the impulse to gravitate toward happiness. With our newfound recognition, the wish for happiness becomes a more valuable tool. We begin to know the qualities of this desire and to feel its subtle, masked, or distorted forms. For example, drugs and alcohol can be understood as self-medication, which may lead to harm, but the impulse to medicate or to balance a sense of sickness comes from a healthy instinct. However destructive some habits may be, uncovering the positive intentions within the behavior may help us develop more effective strategies.

This practice puts us in touch with the pure seeds of loving-kindness and compassion that manifest all the time, even within destructive behaviors and emotions. Normally we miss this part. But if basic goodness can be recognized within extreme behaviors, it helps identify how we seek happiness in normal daily activities. Once we acknowledge our own yearning for happiness, we can expand the aspiration to others.

We begin the expansion by choosing one person for whom feelings of loving-kindness arise easily, such as a parent or a child. *May someone I love have happiness and the causes of happiness.* It's also OK to choose a partner, a pet, or a teacher but it's best to start with a being that evokes unconditional love.

Mingyur Rinpoche's mother, Sonam Chödrön, and her father, Tashi Dorje, Bodh Gaya, India, January 2011.

Now imagine that the object of your meditation wants happiness as much as you do. Be specific. Select someone that you know. Imagine their circumstances, desires, needs, and obstacles. And repeat, "May so-and-so have happiness and the causes of happiness."

Next comes our neutral object: *May someone that I feel neutral toward have happiness and the causes of happiness.* We have no special feelings for this person, no attraction or aversion. Whoever it is—the owner of a local convenience store, the parent of your child's playmate—picture him or her clearly. Then we extend to this person the same desire that we have for our own happiness.

Finally, extend your wish to someone that you do not like. *May someone that I actively dislike have happiness and the causes of happiness.* Then you might think: "This person has parents, just like I do; this person has particular neuroses and needs, just like I do; this person has difficulties with wealth and health, just like I do; and this person has issues with power, love, and loss, just like I do. This person too wants happiness and does not want to suffer." Try to create a sense of identification of common ground. Allow the things that you share to come to the forefront of your mind.

When working with someone you actively dislike, if your choice stimulates strong feelings of aggression, or if anger overwhelms your capacity to meditate, then you need to stop and choose a workable situation. You might recall someone that you find merely annoying, or you might choose a person from your past where intense negativity has softened with time. You can return to working with difficult choices later.

The four exercises for happiness are intended to develop a better understanding of the essential qualities we share with all beings, and to confirm that this commonality outmatches the differences between us.

You shouldn't get discouraged if you continue to dislike the person that you chose for the last happiness meditation. Perhaps you were able to cultivate some genuine loving-kindness during the meditation, but the next day or week you might awake in the middle of the night enraged with that person. That's normal. But over time you can stabilize a shift in how you relate to others. You can accept that you already

know a lot about every stranger you encounter, because you know that they want happiness—just like we do.

Working with Compassion

May I be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

When we work with compassion and the wish to relieve suffering we begin by investigating how our activities—moment after moment—gravitate away from feelings of discomfort, distress, pain and other small and big forms of suffering.

As I already said, loving-kindness and compassion are two sides of the same coin, but with a slight shift in emphasis. "I am going out tonight because I am too lonely to sit home by myself." In this case, the emphasis is not on reaching out for happiness by leaving the house, but on the suffering of loneliness, feeling unloved, unlovable, or unpopular, which arouses compassion.

Next: *May someone I love be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.* Do not forget the second part: "and the causes of suffering." A common problem is that we don't always know what we want. A student of mine grew up dreaming of a cottage by the sea. She saved all her money until her wish came true. It was wonderful. For six months. Essentially she misidentified her source of happiness. She identified her refuge in an external phenomenon, but the neurosis of her mind's habits stayed the same.

Everyone does this. It's the very nature of samsara. Until we pierce the delusions that obscure the very nature of happiness, we will always try to create a perfect life within samsara. That's a contradiction in terms: in samsara, there is no perfect situation. With this aspiration, it's important to identify the causes of suffering: the inability to recognize our true nature, the ignorance about how to go beyond samsara, and the lack of understanding about how to work with our karma.

For these exercises it's not necessary to conjure up the greatest suffering imaginable, such as thinking about someone we love who has cancer or a catastrophic situation. A headache is fine, or an allergy, even

a splinter. There's nothing wrong with thinking of a friend with cancer. If we ourselves are suffering from a terrible disease, then we can say, "May I be free of this disease and its causes, and may all beings be free of this disease and its causes." It is always appropriate—even advantageous—to use our own situations. However, extreme examples tend to gloss over small incidents of dissatisfaction. Yet often enough the minor insults, petty jealousies, or grasping desire for a piece of furniture, cause big problems. Judging the content as insignificant may obscure the significant disturbance to our equanimity.

Once you have grounded the practice in feelings of compassion, then you can move to aspire that people that you neither like nor dislike experience the end of suffering; and then apply this to those you dislike.

Working with Sublime Joy

May I never be parted from the sublime joy free from suffering.

May (someone I love, someone I feel neutral about, someone I dislike) never be parted from the sublime joy free from suffering.

With the third aspiration, we repeat the same sequence as we did with the first two. Starting with ourselves, we recognize our own goodness, we appreciate what we have, and we wish to develop gratitude for the positive things we have. We recognize all the good circumstances and relationships we have experienced throughout our life, such as with our family and friends. We appreciate the guidance and support we have received from others, and we appreciate that we have found a path that will help us discover lasting happiness. We rejoice in that.

For rejoicing, don't make it grand and awesome, such as, "I am so wonderful because I am a famous architect and I climbed Mount Everest and I own a BMW." We are not talking about achievements and gold medals. Keep it simple. "Today I sat outside in the warm sun and had a cup of tea. How lovely." Rejoice in that. "Right now, I am sitting in a chair and reading a book. How nice." Maybe you want to acknowledge that you really want to be a good person, to help others, to learn to be more kind and trusting. Maybe you recall rescuing a lost dog. Our virtues do not have to be grand, but it's important to recognize and appre-

ciate them. It's amazing how difficult this practice can be for people, so if you have problems with it, you are not alone. If you cannot rejoice in your good qualities, that's OK. Be aware of that and try another time.

Cultivating sympathetic joy for a neutral person or someone we dislike generally requires an uncomfortable encounter with jealousy. Jealousy is sort of tricky because it likes to hide. Perhaps we want to feel sympathetic joy when a colleague wins a reward for his project but our jealousy dampens any real enthusiasm; we wish we had won the award and think we deserved it more. If feelings like this arise, just stay with them. After a few minutes, you might develop gratitude for this strong jealousy, because it allows you to look at this part of yourself. Then you can see how it affects the way you relate to others.

Working with Equanimity

May I rest in equanimity free from aversion and attachment to those near and far. To cultivate a sense of what powerful roles attraction and aversion play in your life, try to recollect the simplest, most ordinary examples of moving toward or away from people, foods, smells, clothing, TV shows—anything. Consider what triggers your movements. Try to connect with that sense of moving toward something that attracts you, as if you slipped into a magnetic pull. Likewise, connect to the feeling of being pushed back or repelled by an odor, a color, a vision of violence, or by fear.

Perhaps we identify a group of young men on the street as thugs, and we change direction. Or a movie star appears and we turn to walk in that person's direction. What makes us stop at one restaurant and walk past another? Do we ever gravitate toward people we think have more money than we do, and avoid people we think are not in the same social class that we are in? Are we attracted to fame and name, or repelled by people that we identify as outcasts, losers, or underdogs?

Try to see how much attraction and aversion directs your behavior, and then experiment with your habits. For example, get into the subway and commit to taking the first seat available, no matter what type of person is sitting adjacent, whether disheveled or dressy. One Western

student tried to do this with public toilets in India—to use whatever was available, instead of always searching for cleaner circumstances. It didn't work too well, but at least she tried. The monk that goes forth with a begging bowl does not pick and choose what to eat. What remains steady in the face of various offerings is appreciation for whatever has been given.

To understand the futility of attachment and aversion, we can begin by thinking of someone who had once been a friend and is now an enemy. You might think of an ex-partner, or a former roommate who stole the heart of a special friend, or a longtime business partner who embezzled from the company. Perhaps you learned that your best friend said mean things about you. Or you might think about an enemy who became a friend. The point is to see that even though we might make a big deal out of our attachments and aversions in ways that destroy our equanimity, the objects of these strong emotions constantly shift.

My students in Vancouver were doing this practice, and one man told me about his neighbor. The neighbor was not an awful man, but he did an awful thing: he built a house that partially obstructed my friend's view of the ocean. My friend and his wife tried to "talk reason" to the new neighbor, explaining how he could build his house without ruining their view. But the neighbor wanted his perfect view too and would not change his plans. The neighbor, they learned, was a heart specialist. In telling this story, my student confided that he and his wife had taken to making horrible jokes about how the heart doctor might have a heart attack. And then they would laugh—ha, ha!

But it was my friend who woke in the middle of the night with stabbing chest pains. His wife dialed 911, but then she picked up the phone again and called the neighbor, who ran over in his pajamas with his medicine case and immediately administered drugs. My friend had to have bypass surgery, and the doctors told him that without his neighbor, he would never have made it to the hospital alive. There is no surprise ending: they became great friends and lived happily ever after.

The critical obstacle to equanimity is attachment. There is nothing wrong with preferences. Coffee versus tea. Sunshine versus rain. Problems arise when we stay stuck on what we can't have. For example,

when our heart is so firmly set on chocolate ice cream that we have a mini-meltdown when we can only get vanilla. Or we become distraught if an outdoor event is cancelled because of inconvenient weather. Or if we arrive at a meditation center wishing for a single room when only doubles are available. For now, just look at how the impulse to move toward or away from a person, a situation, a food, a color, a climate, and so on, is based on the unending compulsion to seek happiness in our attractions, and to move away from aversion.

This completes the sequence of applying the four aspirations to four specific categories. Now we are ready to practice the four immeasurables.

The First Immeasurable

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.

Here we let go of the four separate objects of loving-kindness and include all sentient beings. It's important to understand "all" in a literal way. When you work with the boundless aspirations, there are no exceptions—not the dog that killed your cat, not the drunken driver who killed your son, not the dictator who ordered mass killings. Not the torturers, child molesters, or rapists. No exceptions, no loopholes, no picking and choosing. This may sound unrealistic or even undesirable. Yet absolute inclusion makes the exercise workable. Once the mind stops trying to seek out or justify the exceptions, it can relax into the quality of loving-kindness and compassion.

Perhaps right now your mind is fighting against developing loving-kindness for all beings, arguing against the perceived injustice of this concept, or you are trying to convince yourself that this is simply not possible. This is common. Yet look at the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mahatma Gandhi. Their lives embody commitment to political change, but not by fomenting hatred. Hatred is the easy way. What we hear from our greatest leaders is not a call for anger or revenge nor do they ask us to embrace a philosophy of passivity. We hear the essence of compassionate action, which recognizes the suffering of both oppressor and victim. To take revenge on our enemy by becoming the enemy leaves all of us victims. Mahatma Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

To divide human beings into good and bad, imagining that some are worthy of our kindness and compassion while others are not, misses the point. Once we recognize karma, we see clearly that suffering comes to those who cause suffering. Whatever form suffering takes—as killer or killed, robber or robbed—that's the suffering we respond to. Impartiality does not overlook, deny, or condone the negative activity of the aggressor. This would confuse compassion with approval. It is not approval. But we wish that those inflicting harm find freedom from their destructive patterns; we wish for them to find happiness through helping, not harming, others.

For the exercise, don't imagine a situation in great detail and then get caught up in the story line. We are trying to cultivate and expand our heart—to develop the genuine embodied feeling of yearning for all beings to be happy and free from suffering.

Meditation on Loving-Kindness for All Sentient Beings

- Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
- Your eyes can be open or closed.
- For the next minute or two, rest in open awareness.
- Now reflect on the fact that there are limitless sentient beings throughout countless universes and that each one wants happiness.
- Now repeat: "May all sentient beings have happiness and the causes of happiness."
- Allow an expansive feeling of opening out, of blossoming, of dissolving the boundaries between you and others.
- Sense the quality of boundless love that a mother would have for her newborn infant.
- Conclude with resting in open awareness.

During this exercise, meditative awareness rests upon all beings. But you can also alternate this with awareness of sensations, because the physical sensations can become quite strong. At the beginning, don't

worry about holding on to loving feelings. Even if we get a taste of how expansive, impartial, and immeasurable our love can be, that's wonderful.

The Second Immeasurable

May all sentient beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

For this exercise, try thinking of conventional, gross forms of suffering that exist for millions of beings in the world: famine, floods, earthquakes and all the suffering created by the four elements. Or you may wish for people to be free from what the Buddha called the four rivers of suffering: birth, old age, illness, and death.

At this stage, you might use natural or catastrophic causes for the setup, but then bring your mind to the more subtle aspects of self-created suffering: grasping, desire, ego-fixation, ignorance, or the inability to recognize your own buddha nature. From the exercises that we did for the four thoughts, you should have some sense of the underlying causes of suffering, even in the face of natural disasters or physical problems.

The Third Immeasurable

May all beings never be parted from the sublime bliss free from suffering.

This can be quite a difficult exercise. If we are really honest with ourselves, we can see how difficult it is for us to truly rejoice in others' happiness, especially when that feeling is not attached to someone we love. Nurturing this for an entire field of beings—as we imagine for the refuge practice—may take some work.

The feeling of rejoicing here is somewhat more energetic, more enthusiastic than loving-kindness or compassion. Often students complain of not being able to bring this feeling forth. If you get stuck, come back to yourself or to people that you love. Then when you connect with a feeling of enthusiastic joy, try again to extend that to all beings.

The Fourth Immeasurable

May all beings rest in equanimity free from aversion and attachment to those near and far.

The aspiration for this when applied to yourself and others should

have provided an understanding of its importance, and how we can easily slip into the constrictive patterns dominated by unexamined attraction and aversion. So we pray that all beings be liberated from living like leaves blown here and there by the wind, with no direction, no stability of mind, no equanimity.

The Four Immeasurables and Bodhichitta

The four immeasurables are boundless, all-encompassing, and non-discriminating; they can nurture an open heart, create good karma, remove obstacles, and purify negativity. Despite these monumental benefits, bodhichitta takes us a step further. At the same time, without investigating the four immeasurables, it is hard to appreciate how much further bodhichitta takes us. There are two types of bodhichitta: absolute and relative. First we'll look at relative bodhichitta.

Relative Bodhichitta

There are two types of relative bodhichitta: aspiration bodhichitta and application bodhichitta. We start with aspiration bodhichitta since it's a natural extension of the four immeasurables, where our motivation expanded to accommodate the immeasurable beings. But we did not have as our object the ultimate end of suffering, which is enlightenment. With the four immeasurables, the conceptual framework is inherently limited. Without complete enlightenment, we will—to varying degrees—remain entwined with ego, obscurations, and delusions, and will experience some degree of suffering.

Aspiration bodhichitta combines the aspiration that all beings attain enlightenment with the ultimate liberation: we aspire that all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness by becoming completely enlightened; and we aspire that all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering by becoming completely enlightened. With bodhichitta, we work with this ultimate aspiration.

It is very important to tie relative aspiration bodhichitta to relative

application bodhichitta. Let's say I have the wish to travel from northern India to central India. I want to leave Sherab Ling in Himachal Pradesh, and journey to Bodh Gaya in the state of Bihar. My motivation is to visit Mahabodhi, the holy site of Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment, as well as to visit my own nearby monastery, Tergar, so that I can teach the little monks. This is my aspiration, my goal. Next I must plan my journey—never an easy task in India. I read the bus and train schedules, allow for fog and other delays, make my reservation, and so forth. Then I start out.

We apply our efforts to activities that will realize our aspiration. Application bodhichitta emphasizes that our aspiration to become enlightened in order to help all beings become enlightened is stronger than a "wish." Just wishing for something can be quite passive; in contrast, application bodhichitta is vibrant, energetic, and engaged. We don't just wish; we activate our intentions.

Focusing on the fruition is aspiration bodhichitta: I wish to go to Bodh Gaya. I wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of living beings. Aspiration bodhichitta begins with the recognition of the basic fundamental feeling that exists within each sentient being to be happy and free from suffering. Once the recognition is stable, we extend the aspiration. Don't worry about the details. We allow our heart to open to the immeasurable wish for the immeasurable beings. That includes ourselves. Don't forget that part.

Application Bodhichitta and The Six Paramitas

While aspiration bodhichitta is oriented toward the end point of the path—the complete enlightenment of all beings—application bodhichitta works with the causes and conditions to bring about this fruition. The practical means for helping all beings discover their true nature are the six paramitas. *Paramita* means "perfection," and includes six behaviors that transcend samsara, go beyond samsara, and that aspiring bodhisattvas like us apply in daily life to perfect our inherent enlightened qualities and to cross over from confusion to clarity:

generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. Once we encounter the paramitas, ngondro becomes relative bodhichitta practice. Let's see how this works.

The first paramita, generosity, might prompt thoughts of charitable contributions, or volunteering in a soup kitchen, or a hospice program. This kind of generosity cannot be dismissed. But more subtle forms of generosity exist as well. The protection of live market animals—such as goats, lobsters, turtles—is a another form of generosity. Animals can be purchased and then either released into their natural habitat or cared for until they die. Protection may be catching insects inside the house and releasing them outside.

We can also direct our generous efforts toward anything that helps others connect with their true nature. This is called the generosity of giving the dharma.

We can also give the gift of our own presence—just showing up with as much steadiness of mind as we can. Of course, that takes practice. We can understand our ngondro practice as an act of generosity. When we let go of our ego-centered habits, we provide ourselves and others with the possibility of just being without hope and fear, without anxiety and judgments. When we apply bodhichitta, our aspiration to help all beings becomes an act of generosity, and meditation practice can also be an act of generosity.

The second paramita, discipline, takes many forms. The simplest way to understand discipline is to break it into three categories: avoid activities that create suffering; do things that foster happiness and well-being; and help others. Each step of ngondro generates all three aspects of discipline.

Misunderstood, discipline gets confused with a kind of uptight piety, but what we're talking about here isn't joyless moral restraint. Discipline should be held lightly and with humor, and be used as another lens through which we connect to greater awareness about our behavior.

Patience, the third paramita, can be explored in terms of how it directly relates to dharma practice. For example, ordinarily we might complain about knee pain when we meditate, or become frustrated by our lack of accomplishment, or become bored with our practice or

hopelessly restless. Intellectually we might even acknowledge these difficulties as natural elements of the spiritual path. But to cut through the normal negative reactivity, we need patience. It requires patience to step back from habitual reactivity and not get caught in the current. With the practice of patience, our options multiply. It takes patience to stick with a practice that may require one hundred thousand repetitions.

The fourth paramita, diligence, gives us the energy to continue our journey of awakening. In traditional texts, diligence is defined as taking delight in virtue and as the opposite of laziness. Laziness can take the form of procrastination, but it also refers to feeling discouraged and despondent. Diligence offers the best protection against this state of mind. Just as a waterproof covering protects against rain, diligence protects against all the circumstances and conditions that tempt us to give up on ourselves. To complete ngondro, diligence is required, not only to go beyond physical discomforts, but to work with the fear and resistance that arise in the face of letting go of ego-fixations.

The fifth paramita is meditation, which, when perfected, means that our mind does not waver from awareness, regardless of what we are doing or where we are. Whether we use awareness with support or awareness without support bodhichitta, vipashyana—whatever method we employ, ngondro provides ample opportunity to cultivate meditative awareness.

The sixth paramita—wisdom—is the most important, because without wisdom, the other five activities cannot be perfected. Wisdom is what makes generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, and meditation transcend ordinary forms of good or ethical behavior.

Wisdom takes many forms such as the wisdom that comes from hearing and studying the dharma, the wisdom that comes from reflecting and contemplating what we learn, the wisdom that comes from the direct experience we gain through meditation, and the wisdom that recognizes the empty nature of all phenomena. With regard to the paramitas, wisdom is the element of working for the welfare of others without getting stuck in beliefs and expectations, so that when we perform an act of generosity, for example, we do so without losing sight of our basic nature—the empty clarity of pure awareness. This

allows generosity to be applied without the egocentric preoccupation with rewards and results.

Ngondro encourages the practice of all six paramitas in one package and manifests relative application bodhichitta practice. Why do we prostrate, why do we chant, why do we imagine the refuge tree and the sources of refuge? Because these are the causes—the application—of our aspiration to become enlightened for all sentient beings. We cannot have a motivation greater than this.

Absolute Bodhichitta

Now why do we describe this boundless, limitless, infinite aspiration and its application as "relative"? Because even though it is the most beneficent, altruistic motivation possible, it still functions within the realm of concepts. No matter how much we have dissolved ego-fixation, a residual sense of "I" bows and prostrates and prays so that "I" can become enlightened to help "others" be enlightened. The "I" and "the other" are aspects of relative, dualistic, unenlightened reality.

When we speak of absolute bodhichitta, we point to a completely awakened mind that has moved beyond all concepts, beyond all dualities, beyond samsara and nirvana. Used in the absolute sense, bodhichitta becomes another way of referring to buddhahood, awakening, enlightenment, recognizing emptiness, and realizing boundless, indivisible, sky-like reality.

In my own ngondro studies I was confused about how absolute bodhichitta could be of service to sentient beings. In my first three-year retreat, I was practicing loving-kindness and compassion and thinking about the poor people in my hometown, Nubri. I could see individual faces that I knew, I could see inside their rough huts, and I could feel their shivering bodies in the winter. I knew that sometimes they went to sleep hungry and cold. I was in my room at Sherab Ling and I became very sad. I found the practice really depressing. I was close to tears and could not see how such sadness could help anyone. In my sorry state, I was much further away from being able to help anyone than when I began.

After a while I no longer wanted to be alone, so I went to see Saljay

Rinpoche. I told him that I had been meditating on loving-kindness and compassion but had encountered a big problem: now I was just as unhappy as all the other people who wished to be free from suffering. I told him, "Now we are all suffering together. What is so great about that? If the Buddha's compassion is immeasurable, then the Buddha must be suffering more than anyone in the whole world, and that is really, really sad."

"No," Saljay Rinpoche said, with unusual bluntness. "The Buddha's compassion is not filled with sadness because the Buddha knows emptiness. The wisdom of emptiness allows for limitless compassion beyond suffering."

I did not understand, and Saljay Rinpoche continued. "It's because of emptiness that compassion can be immeasurable," he told me. "Our concepts about compassion limit our capacities. Our activities may be inspired by ideas of kindness, love, and compassion, but they are also constricted by them. All concepts are bound and fettered. To the extent that we are tied to concepts of compassion, our activities will be measured, and therefore limited. Immeasurable compassion can only arise in the absence of concepts and with the wisdom of emptiness."

Then he told me, "Stop focusing on loving-kindness and compassion. Meditate on emptiness. Then, slowly, you will arrive at the union of emptiness and compassion."

From the ultimate view—or from the view of emptiness—suffering, confusion, and all of samsara are relative concepts. Yet billions of beings in the world perceive suffering, confusion, and samsara; they believe in their inevitability and in their certain reality. They do not realize the ways in which they create suffering for themselves.

With the union of emptiness and compassion, we are not entrapped by the relative reality of suffering, nor are we analyzing it. We are not using our limited, conceptual intellect to figure it out. The intelligent heart responds with compassion, while at the same time wisdom recognizes the true emptiness of the situation. We do not have to become entangled in the story line that people use to explain their unhappiness. We may be able to analyze how they create their own suffering; we may perceive the delusions that make their confusion appear fixed

and immutable. We recognize the insubstantial nature of the situation, but we still see people trapped in destructive habits, and we respond to people's inability to step away from their own confusion.

Recognizing emptiness closes the gap between self and other, and this manifests the union of emptiness and compassion. This explains why enlightened beings are capable of boundless activity, while the average social activist gets burned out. If we bring our conceptual, quantifiable, ego-bound ideas to our good deeds, the work quickly becomes overwhelming: "There is so much work that I must do." The challenge appears insurmountable, requiring exertion beyond our capacity. We may despair or become willful and driven, out to prove that the size of our commitment or dedication is commensurate to an outsized task.

Yet every concept about how significant and vital our work is, and about how we can or cannot achieve it, is constrained by the limitations of conceptual thinking. It's as if our aspirations hit a wall—and that wall is made up of ideas, delusions, and preconceptions about who we are and what we are doing, or what we can do or should do, and this leads to exhaustion. Both the work and the worker become objectified and quantified. This offers no immeasurability, and actually magnifies fatigue.

Immeasurability is made possible by emptiness. Once we bring emptiness into the picture, the whole situation loosens up. Experiences that once seemed real and substantial might now become dreamlike. If we see someone suffering in a dream, we can spontaneously do something to help alleviate their suffering—but without getting caught in the drama and without taking our actions and ourselves too seriously. We can work wholeheartedly for the welfare of others, while at the same time recognizing that the entire situation arises from the mind.

A student once asked a Buddhist master, "Once you get enlightened, do you still suffer?"

"Yes," said the master. "When my wife died, I cried and cried. But my tears had no roots."

Tears without roots. Once emptiness has been recognized, suffering cannot take hold. It does not arise from habits or neuroses, and does not perpetuate attachment to suffering or patterns of self-pity.

If we lose sight of emptiness, then the bodhisattva commitment is not only inconceivable, but also unmanageable. For this to really work, we must have some recognition of emptiness, even if it requires a leap of faith. Without any experience, emptiness also becomes just another concept—which, because it's a concept, keeps us stuck in samsara.

Once we understand bodhichitta, then all the practices become immeasurable and become an expression of the paramitas, of going beyond samsara. If we do not bring forth bodhichitta, then even if we practice generosity, it is not immeasurable and does not activate the ultimate motivation to help all beings toward the ultimate liberation, toward enlightenment.

Dedicating the Merit

Before moving on, I want to introduce a very important element that relates to bodhichitta. At the very end of every practice session, we "dedicate the merit." The actual words that we say vary within different liturgies, but it's something like: "I now dedicate whatever merit or virtue that I have gathered to the welfare of all sentient beings, that they may be freed from the sufferings of samsara."

From now on, we can dedicate the merit after practicing the four thoughts or after sitting in open awareness. Dedicating the merit is introduced here because of its relationship to bodhichitta, but it's critical to our practice that we end every session this way, no matter what practice we do or how long we do it. When practicing many sessions in one day, we end each session with dedicating the merit. This is the most succinct way of reaffirming our intention to let go of ego-fixation and to practice for the benefit of others. If we do not give away our merit it may grow in our own mind like barnacles that stick to a boat, until we are pulled down by the weight of ego-pride. By giving the merit away, we make sure that we do not misuse our dharma practice in order to put another hat on our head.

Dedicating the merit is also a way of "sealing" the benefits of the practice. Without this, whatever meritorious action we perform will have a very short-term effect and can be lost very easily. This sends

forth our aspirations so that the benefits of our practice will multiply for others as well as for ourselves.

Dedicating the merit is one of the most profound aspects of our practice, but it is not confined to formal practice sessions. We can dedicate the merit after any positive experience, whether it is a social action-activity such as working with homeless people, or volunteering at a hospital, or donating money to some good cause. It can also come after performing music or theater for others, or writing a poem, or taking a swim in a mountain lake. The point is not to keep the merit or the effects of positive experiences for ourselves, and not to allow self-satisfaction or pride to increase our obscurations. If we hold on to the merit, we are taking one step forward, one step back. Dedicating the merit, on and off the cushion, keeps us going forward.

Please do not forget to end each practice session this way, and to remember that dedicating the merit for the benefit of all beings includes ourselves.

9. The Second Unique Practice

PURIFICATION

At this stage, we have used the four thoughts to orient us toward freedom. External images of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha put us in touch with our true refuge, meaning our own buddha nature. Having identified the causes and characteristics of suffering, we expand our aspiration for liberation to include all sentient beings. With this magnified motivation, we wish to dissolve everything that stands in the way of recognizing our innate purity, to cleanse every bit of dirt that still obscures the diamond.

From the ultimate view, if we are pure, pristine, and perfect, then what are we purifying? We must purify our ignorance about the fact that we are inherently pure. At this moment we are as pure as we will ever be, but we do not accept this, so we must purify the mind's confusion until we recognize our original purity. This is why we practice, and in order to accomplish our way, we supplicate Vajrasattva, a buddha who specializes in removing obscurations.

In my lineage, all the buddhas merge into Vajrasattva, a buddha particularly beloved among Tibetans. Before becoming an enlightened deity he was a sentient being just like us, living in samsara with confusion. Yet he developed bodhichitta and vowed to become enlightened for the benefit of all beings. He then added this special aspiration: "When I become a realized buddha, may all sentient beings be purified of obscurations, ignorance, negativity, and broken vows by seeing my form with their eyes, by hearing my name with their ears, or by reciting

the Vajrasattva mantra. And if all sentient beings are not liberated by this practice, then may I not become enlightened."

My father used to tell me, "One match can burn an entire mountain of dry grass, and Vajrasattva practice has this kind of power, this kind of effectiveness." It can burn a mountain of bad karma and cut through aeons of negativity and obscurations. When we sincerely take these practices to heart, nothing in our life, past or present—nothing at all, no matter how awful—cannot be purified. This was true even for Angulimala, who was a serial killer at the time of the historical Buddha. Angulimala killed 999 people, but even this immense destruction did not have the power to define him. He became a follower of Shakyamuni Buddha and transformed his murderous rampage into awakened buddha mind.

The possibilities offered by this practice are so appealing, don't you think? When I was little I was too lazy for prostrations, but I loved Vajrasattva practice. (We say either "purification practice" or "Vajrasattva practice." Because this step of ngondro introduces mantra recitation, it is sometimes called mantra practice.)

Purification in the Ngondro Sequence

In ngondro, taking refuge utilizes Vajrayana methods such as imagination. Yet taking refuge, as well as contemplating the four thoughts, is common to all Buddhist schools. With bodhichitta, we entered the world of the Mahayana or great vehicle. From now on, the aspiration to become enlightened so that we can help all sentient beings continues to deepen and remain activated, no matter what we are doing: practicing in a formal way, walking down the street, waiting at the airport, sleeping, eating—everything.

With Vajrasattva, we engage in one of the two main practices of Mahayana: purification, which is the focus of our Vajrasattva practice; and the accumulation of merit and wisdom, which is the focus of mandala practice, the next step in ngondro. This sequence follows "Tibetan Mahayana," meaning that this is how we proceed in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In the case of Vajrasattva practice, we use the special

Vajrayana methods of imagining Vajrasattva and reciting the one-hundred-syllable mantra to aid this process of purification.

Even though the force of habit may leave our behavior full of holes, we are slowly stabilizing our intentions and motivations, and step-by-step, dharma may be making real differences in our life. Yet we may feel held back on our path, as if one foot is nailed to the ground. Perhaps we have become more cognizant and accepting of our neuroses and ego-fixations. But even with inspired determination, we cannot circumvent the mental disturbances caused by negative actions.

One tip: don't be fooled into thinking that if your bad deeds pale in comparison with a killer like Angulimala, then you have nothing to purify. We are working with our mind. Yelling at our partners or children, sexual misconduct, killing animals—including the unintentional killing of bugs or insects when driving—and even venomous thoughts affect our equanimity. Mental and physical activities that trouble our mind function like turbulent waters that distort the tranquil surface of a lake. They muddy up clear perception and maintain mental conditioning that interferes with our path to freedom. Not purifying this negative karma leaves us like songbirds trying to fly with weights on our wings. Our strenuous efforts cannot defeat the emotional burdens that we carry. Past events can harden into pockets of fear and trauma, guilt and remorse, which stay stuck inside of us. It does not help to say, "Oh, but they are ultimately, inherently empty." Emptiness is not an idea, but a lived experience, and these knots of tension that remain in our mind and body block our awakening.

Conventional and Ultimate Aspects

Like the refuge vow, Vajrasattva practice encompasses a conventional/relative aspect and an ultimate/absolute aspect. The relative aspect deals with nonvirtuous actions that arise from ignorance and perpetuate ignorance. Angulimala represents an extreme example. He also represents working with negativity rather than discarding it. It's like composting: we gather stinking garbage, but instead of carting it to the dump, we recognize that it contains positive attributes that can

fertilize our mind. Much of Vajrayana uses what we have—even our bad karma—as an invaluable source of transformation. Once we really comprehend that nothing in our life needs to be discarded, or swept under the rug, or cut out like some kind of spiritual surgery, then the path becomes quite joyful.

From the absolute view, the practitioner has no inherent independent identity—nor does the object of that person's supplications, nor does the action. Ultimately all of us and all of our activities are emptiness. Vajrasattva is emptiness, and our supplications and prayers are emptiness. Ultimately there is no past and no future. Understanding the essential emptiness of form offers the best purification. However, as long as we live in the relative world and relate to our life from the relative perspective, we benefit from the relative practice. Still, it's important to hold some idea, however faint, of the absolute view, because to be enlightened we must purify our view that we are not essentially empty and pure.

During the practice session, Vajrasattva sits directly above our head. We may begin with a dualistic sense that "I am supplicating him." Yet this dissolves into an absolute nondual union of Vajrasattva and ourselves. In the practice, we imagine becoming the deity that we supplicate. This is not a temporary union that occurs during practice. This union manifests the true, continuous inseparability between the impure form of our relative self with the pristine purity of our absolute self.

Faith in Emptiness

In talking with students, I have encountered resistance to the very possibility of neutralizing negative karma, let alone transforming it into something positive. People can feel so guilty about an action that release feels undeserved. If guilt and shame appear as appropriate responses to negative activity, then in their own eyes, they are monstrous if they do not maintain guilt and shame. Yet this keeps the mind spinning to no advantage. We don't learn anything by going around and around repeating our stories to ourselves and others.

For most people, residual disturbances have thoroughly merged with

the fabricated self, making it extremely difficult to separate them. But if we take advantage of being human, we can recognize how we have glued this fabrication together and how we can unglue it; with this understanding, the whole project becomes workable. If we approach purification with a solid, tight, permanent sense of self, it will be difficult to make much headway. But our investigations of impermanence prepared us for recognizing that any action can be purified, because the obscuration is the residue of a temporary event. Our buddha nature is like pure water: if water mixes with sediment it can be purified, because the nature of water remains pure. No matter how much mud covers the diamond, its true nature remains.

Mantra Practice

In the process of this practice, we supplicate the deity with the Vajrasattva mantra, which introduces mantra for the first time in the ngondro practice. In Sanskrit, *man* means "mind," and *tra* means "protection." Reciting mantra protects the mind against identifying with the monkey and with the normal chatter that generally keeps our ego at the center of things. Mantra is another aid for calm abiding. It absorbs the mind's tendency to talk to itself and about itself, and collects scattered mental energy. Saying "Blah, blah, blah" might also absorb monkey-mind chatter and give our ego a little break, like going to the movies and not thinking about ourselves for an hour or two. Yet there's no transformative value in blocking or suppressing the ego. But mantra helps us, because mantra words are not ordinary.

The syllables in mantras embody the enlightened qualities, blessings, wisdom, and compassion of the buddhas. Because thousands of awakened masters have recited particular mantras over thousands of years, we consider that the mantra has been blessed by them, and has come to us through them. These blessings manifest the power of positive interconnection. Buddhas, enlightened beings, lineage masters, and gurus have repeated these sounds millions of times before we ever heard them. Saying these words, hearing them, and repeating them have their own interdependent karma that links enlightened beings, lineage holders,

gurus, and disciples. The sound itself is sacred, not just its meaning. That's why we say, "Even if you do not know the meaning, the sound can help." This manifests the karma of language or the karma of sound.

From the absolute view, ordinary words are emptiness, sublime words are emptiness, and all sounds and blessings are emptiness. But again, this doesn't mean that relative values have no benefit. Water is empty, but still satisfies our thirst.

We create negative karma with our body, speech, and mind. Because of the mantra recitation, purification inVajrasattva practice focuses on speech, although we work with the body and mind as well. We work with the body through posture and with the mind through awareness and imagination. However, since the prime practice activity is the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra, the practice is mostly identified with the purification of negative speech: lying, idle chatter, slander, and so forth.

In addition to speech, this practice can be used to purify anything, not just speech. It can purify trauma, bad memories, and recurrent nightmares. It can purify the causes of negative actions such as anger, jealousy, greed, and other destructive impulses. When we say "the practice" can do all these wonderful things, we mean our own efforts, intentions, and aspirations. The power for transformation is internal and depends on faith in our own capabilities.

We recite mantras out loud, though the sound may emerge as a whisper. When we're very sleepy, we raise our voice to energize ourselves. When traveling in a car with others or on an airplane, we repeat the mantra silently. Today the whole world is connected through speech. We have radio, television, the Internet, e-mail, and text messaging. When we consider the interdependence of all phenomena and apply that to the karma of words, we see that we are engaging a powerful force.

The Four Powers

With Vajrasattva practice, we acknowledge past activities that have created suffering for ourselves and others. Generally we cannot confront ourselves in ways that effectively alleviate negative feelings. We

need help, and this practice contains four approaches to purification: the power of support, the power of remorse, the power of the antidote, and the power of resolve. We follow this order in accord with the logic of the sequence.

The Power of Support

The power of support has two aspects. The first is relative aspiration bodhichitta: "Why am I doing this practice? Who am I practicing for? I want to do this purification practice to become enlightened and help all beings become enlightened." This establishes our immeasurable motivation and fortifies our commitment. This support comes from our side.

The second support comes from Vajrasattva's side. We imagine him sitting just above our head. Vajrasattva becomes the object of our confessions—a stable, nonjudgmental, compassionate witness who supports our efforts to repair any physical or emotional damage that we have intentionally or innocently caused in this or previous lives. We turn to Vajrasattva, who reflects back to us the courage to witness our negative activities with compassion, wisdom, and equanimity, and who helps us connect to our own clarity.

Imagining Vajrasattva

Vajrasattva sits above us facing the same direction as we face, embodying the union of emptiness and clarity. We imagine him as translucent white in color, dazzling but without substance, like a rainbow or a holograph, vivid in appearance yet empty. His head tilts to the left, his face is peaceful, with a faint smile. Remember not to make the visualization too tight. Develop a vibrant sense of Vajrasattva's presence without fixating on every little detail. Our conviction of his presence establishes the critical element to making this an effective and transformative exercise.

Above our head, maybe two or four inches, is a white lotus flower with a moon disk. Again, the lotus represents abiding in samsara but not being attached to it, and conveys the enlightened activities of the buddhas. On this throne Vajrasattva sits with his legs loosely crossed and with the right foot slightly extended in front. His right hand holds

Vajrasattva, the buddha who embodies fundamental purity.

a vajra at his heart center. His left hand rests on his hip, holding an upturned silver bell. The vajra represents compassion and clarity; the bell represents emptiness and wisdom. The image is the union of emptiness and appearance. Vajrasattva appears as one separate deity, yet rays of light emanate from his heart center, inviting the assembly of wisdom deities who then merge with him so that he becomes the essence of all the buddhas.

Upside-Down Vajrasattva

I started this practice with my father when I was still living at Nagi Gompa. At first I could not imagine Vajrasattva very clearly. Some days

I tried so hard that my mind went blank. I complained to my father that I could not do this practice. He told me, "Relax your mind. You are trying too hard."

I followed my father's instructions, and within a few weeks my Vajrasattva image became really clear. Perfect. Fantastic. I went back to my father and told him that I had become very good at imagining Vajrasattva above my head. I could imagine the lotus disks and the colors, the bell and the vajra—everything.

He told me, "Oh, that's very nice, very nice. Now imagine Vajrasattva upside down."

I went away feeling deflated, hopeless. After a few days, I told him, "I really tried, but I could not imagine Vajrasattva upside down."

"Imagination is not real," my father explained. "It is like the moon's reflection in the lake. It can move, it can become wavy, it can change. That's its nature. You do not have to hold the image in such a fixed, tight way. Getting the image perfect is not the point. It's more important to feel the presence of the buddhas."

Always try to feel the animated presence of the buddhas. This is more important than perfecting the image.

The Power of Remorse

The historical Buddha had four disciples whose personal histories evolved into the four powers used in this practice. Of these four disciples, Angulimala's story is the most well-known and most dramatic. Angulimala, under the misguided direction of his professor at the celebrated university of Taxila—which existed in what today is Pakistan—set out to kill 1,000 people. He was one victim short of completing his mission when he noticed a monk walking way ahead of him on the road. He already had 999 fingers around his neck—the name *Angulimala* means "garland of fingers." But however fast he ran toward the monk, he could not catch up, even though the monk maintained the same pace.

Finally Angulimala yelled out, "Hey you, wait up!" The monk continued walking. He yelled again, "Why don't you stop?"

Without turning around, the monk said, "I did stop, Angulimala. You should stop, too."

"That's strange," thought Angulimala to himself. "He says that he stopped, but he is still walking. Is he a monk who lies?"

Angulimala continued to run quickly, and the monk continued to walk slowly. Then from afar, Angulimala called to the monk, "What did you mean 'I stopped'? You're still walking."

The monk replied, "I stopped creating suffering for myself and others. But you, Angulimala, are busy running here and there with so much fear and anguish in your mind."

Then Angulimala thought, "Wow, he knows my situation. He understands my mind." The monk slowed down, and when Angulimala caught up, he saw that it was Shakyamuni Buddha, who smiled at the man with 999 fingers around his neck. No one had looked at Angulimala with such kindness for a long time, and all his murderous intentions melted away.

The Buddha said, "You must stop killing. You are causing incalculable harm to yourself and others." Then Angulimala understood that his professor had tricked him. He became distraught and horrified by his behavior.

In that moment, it was impossible for Angulimala to imagine a shred of anything worthwhile in his destructive behavior. We too might assume that there is no wisdom to be found in Angulimala's actions. Normally we do not bother to look for goodness in negative actions in ourselves or in others. That's a mistake, because there's always one excellent quality—even for a killer like Angulimala: every negative act has within it the seed of purification. There is no such thing as absolute negativity. There is no absolute bad karma. Impossible.

This is not just uplifting, feel-good spiritual therapy. This is the truth of dharma. If we do not believe in the possibility of purification for the very most terrible acts, then we cannot accept the relative truth of impermanence, which rests with the absolute truth of emptiness. Nothing stays the same, and that includes negative karma. Whether or not that seed of purification will ripen depends on how we deal with our negativities. But we must know with conviction that we embody

the capacity for purification, just as we do for liberation. The Buddha saw that Angulimala clearly recognized his own predicament, that he took responsibility for his actions, and that he was sincere in his wish to make amends.

Not long after his initial encounter with the Buddha, Angulimala shaved his head and became a monk. Although he vowed never to kill in the future, his mind remained tormented by his past. The Buddha explained the truth of emptiness, the impermanent nature of all phenomena, and the capacity for purification, but the Buddha could not wave a wand and wash away Angulimala's bad karma and restore him to sanity. Angulimala had his work cut out: to transform guilt and remorse into positive qualities. That was his special challenge, and since he had killed so many people, we can imagine what a mountain of a challenge he faced. Eventually Angulimala used remorse to transform guilt and shame into wisdom and compassion, and Angulimala's transformation forms the basis for the approach to purification that, in ngondro, we call the power of remorse.

When we commit acts that violate our own sense of right and wrong, then like Angulimala, we feel guilt and shame. But these feelings do not necessarily stop us from repeating the same behavior or make us commit to purifying our negative karma. However, with the feeling of remorse comes the possibility for change. We recognize the suffering we have caused. We wish that we had not done this. We sincerely pray that we not repeat this in the future, and we aspire to purify the karma that we created.

We cannot remember every little detail from this life, every little white lie or every bug that we killed, and we certainly cannot remember what we did in our past lives. So don't get hung up on the details. We can aspire to purify whatever bad karma we've made in this life—and past lives—for the benefit of bringing all sentient beings to enlightenment.

Remorse vs. Guilt

Let's try to distinguish between remorse and guilt. Angulimala's situation was pretty extreme, so think of something suitable—an incident that continues to haunt you, or one that involves killing, maybe of

animals, or stealing or lying, or sexual misconduct. Bring a specific situation to mind and consider how you normally relate to this action. Often we try to avoid it. The event comes to mind, but the mind backs away. You know how your hand leaps in front of your face to protect it from dirt kicked up by a passing truck? It's a kind of flinching motion. That's often how the mind responds to guilt. The old image, or mental movie of our action, triggers too much aversion for us to witness, but nonetheless we feel disturbed. Our mind becomes gripped by the feeling, but with no release.

Another response to an action that disturbs our equanimity is to replay it again and again. In the first case, we cannot look at it. Here we cannot stop looking at it. Negative emotional associations may erupt repeatedly, but in the end, it is just another movie in which we star as the main character. We watch ourselves over and over with no exit from this loop, and nagging self-recrimination persists.

So how can we use remorse to alleviate suffering rather than allow it to keep us stuck in guilt? We do this through the wisdom of awareness. We need to separate guilt from remorse. Guilt keeps the focus on our personal emotional response. This can happen so thoroughly that the emotion takes on a life of its own, leaving no room for a corrective impulse.

Try looking directly at a troublesome activity without judgment. Don't try to understand, judge, or change it. Just review it. With the calm-abiding mind of shamata, we watch the activity as if standing on the reviewing platform of a parade, or as if standing on the bank of a river without being carried away by the current. The story may have a lot of emotional force, but we apply the same meditation that we use for awareness with object.

Remember that all this time Vajrasattva sits just above our head, ready to support our every effort. He too is witnessing, but not judging. His kindness and compassion do not differentiate between "victim" and "perpetrator." Seeing our innate purity, he aspires for us to see our innate purity, and his aspiration for all beings to attain enlightenment radiates without discrimination.

Using this excellent support, try to stay with witnessing. Shamata practice makes it easier to recognize when our mind steps away from witnessing and gets caught by the story, or slips into aversion and tries to flinch away from just watching. See if it's possible to create some space between the action and the emotional drama that has fueled the story. See if it's possible to break the pattern of empowering the action with emotional energy.

In this way, remorse creates the context that gives rise to the recognition of what we have done and what we can do about it. Remorse that acknowledges our negative behavior now becomes our ally, and Vajrasattva becomes the vehicle by which we reorient our behavior from nonvirtuous to virtuous action. Remorse—not the emotional grip of shame and guilt—allows for purification, and therefore helps move us forward.

Insect Karma

Many students use Vajrasattva to purify their role in the countless deaths of insects, moths, mice, or ants. I have heard so many different strategies for getting rid of insects and rodents that I could become an exterminator consultant! Once a student came to Bodh Gaya for a month-long course on Shantideva's *Way of the Bodhisattva*. One evening she was studying the text in her room and became so infuriated by a mosquito that when it landed near the ceiling, she threw the Shantideva book at it. A splat of red appeared, but it was too high for her to clean. For the rest of her stay, she had to endure a daily reminder of both her act and her impulsive choice of weapon—which made her feel particularly awful.

Some people keep cats to kill mice, which allows them to keep their own karma stainless. Other people keep their cats indoors to spare their prey—and their cats' karma. One thing about working with insects or small rodents: do not get overwhelmed by the details. In general, this is true for any subject, but particularly here. If you try to recall every instance of killing a bug, it might take the rest of your life. Keep it simple. For example: "I am truly sorry for the lives I have taken."

A Jewelry Thief

People often come to dharma after their lives fall apart. One of the most extreme examples I know concerns a kleptomaniac—a compulsive stealer. This woman would go to department stores and steal jewelry that cost thousands of dollars: earrings, rings, and bracelets. She had been the financial officer of a corporation, so her behavior had nothing to do with lack of money. She understood that it was a sickness, an addiction, but she could not control it. She was very tall with black hair pulled back into a bun, and she had a commanding, regal posture, self-assured and confident. She attributed her long string of successful robberies to her appearance, as she did not fit the stereotype of a thief, and salespeople did not keep their eyes on her. But one day, a hidden surveillance camera photographed her slipping an expensive necklace into her purse. Her husband of more than twenty years had no idea that his wife had this problem. Her teenage children were horrified, as her arrest was reported in the news. She did not steal after that, but her entire life fell apart.

Like Angulimala, this woman had to learn to replay her story as a series of still images on an old-fashioned movie reel—one image at a time—until she could separate her emotional reactivity from the actions themselves. Once we allow our mind to abide in the awareness of witnessing, and we no longer succumb to aversion or attachment, then we can access the wisdom of remorse. If we remain so afraid of what we have done or so enthralled by the power of guilt and shame, then we cannot really assess our actions. But now we can calmly investigate and recognize their negative effects. With this, remorse becomes the catalyst for change. Again, Vajrasattva is there to support us. Remorse allows us to understand and accept the harm that we caused without getting carried away by the emotional heat of the story.

The power of remorse also counters feeling good about bad deeds. Outwitting a competitor through trickery may generate complacency or pride. Yet if we congratulate ourselves for being wizards of deception, we will not let go of the habit of harming. If we give ourselves a hero's welcome after contributing to the downfall of an enemy, we intensify those negative emotional forces that are our real enemies.

Tips for the Practice

As effective as the power of remorse can be, it is not enough to purify aeons of bad karma. We need the power of the antidote as well. That comes next, but first I want to go over some practical points about the practice.

When we practice Vajrasattva, we first invoke bodhichitta motivation. We clarify why we are doing this practice, who we are doing this for, and we clarify our aspiration. This is the first part of the power of support.

For the second part, the power of remorse, we imagine Vajrasattva above our head. For this part, we can spend one or two minutes recalling a particular action that has created guilt or shame. If we have the time, we can spend five or ten minutes reviewing the action without being swept up in it. If we are working with a particularly difficult situation, we set aside more time. If we have a situation like Angulimala's, we set aside a lot of time! There is no fixed recommendation.

Before moving into the third part, the power of the antidote, it can be very helpful to identify some activity, emotion, or illness that we specifically wish to purify. We can proceed with a generalized aspiration, thinking, "Whatever harm I caused or may have caused to any sentient being in all my past, whatever negative karma I have accumulated, I pray that it may now be purified for the benefit of all sentient beings."

This is fine. It might change. Some people start this way before connecting with a specific event that may be deeply buried. But when particular issues appear on the surface of our memory, I suggest working with them.

Now we are ready for the actual purification. Remorse creates the urgency and determination for purification.

The Power of the Antidote

We use the term *antidote* to mean the opposite of negativity, in the same way that water is the antidote to fire or that light dispels darkness. Here we use imagination and mantra as the antidote for negativity. Vajrasattva appears very real, but like a reflection in the mirror, he has no

blood and bones, no substance. Then we add a moon disk at the center of Vajrasattva's heart. Upon this disk is the letter HUNG in the same translucent white as Vajrasattva's body.

The Sanskrit syllable HUNG.

The letters of the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra are coiled, snakelike, around the HUNG in a counterclockwise direction. The mantra embodies the union of wisdom, compassion, and the essence of all the buddhas, as well as that of the enlightened beings and our gurus and teachers. While we recite the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra, the force of our devotion and sincerity activates the mantra at the center of Vajrasattva's heart.

The one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra begins: OM VAJRASATTVA / SAMAYAM ANUPALAYA / VAJRASATTVA . . . and so forth. Using the English alphabet to spell Sanskrit sounds means that various transliterations of this mantra exist, as well as various translations. Because the sounds alone are considered to manifest, generate, and activate blessings, and because translations cannot embody the transcendent aspect of blessings, many people recite mantras with no sense of their meaning. However, I think that without getting too literal, it's

inspiring to have a general idea of what we are saying. Basically this mantra offers a heartfelt supplication asking for Vajrasattva to help us to acknowledge, witness, and let go of all that impedes our recognition of our own purity, and it has a very personal quality: "Vajrasattva, I pray to you . . . Stay by me, stick with me, steady me through this difficult challenge of facing my own misdeeds." The mantra pleads with Vajrasattva not to abandon us at this time—which is a way of asking that we do not abandon ourselves, that we do not give up on ourselves.

With the recitation, the mantra syllables begin rotating counterclockwise around the letter HUNG. With this rotation, the collective wisdom of enlightened beings is released from the letters in the form of pure nectar. The recitation can be done at any point in the practice.

This nectar is not quite like water, but more like liquid light, brilliant, shimmering, and transparent. The nectar too is the essence of all the buddhas and of the wisdom and compassion of all the enlightened beings. Of course, wisdom doesn't have form and color; compassion doesn't have form and color. But when we take imagination as the path, we are free to imbue form with wisdom and compassion in order to inspire our practice.

The nectar slowly fills Vajrasattva from his toes up to the top of his head. Within the stream of this nectar flows the wisdom, compassion, and power of Vajrasattva's buddha-mind, filling his translucent body. Even the syllable HUNG and the one-hundred-syllable mantra sink into the nectar as it reaches his heart area. The level of nectar rises higher and higher, until even one more thimbleful of nectar cannot fit in. Then the nectar descends from the top of his body to the bottom, where it leaves through the big toe of his right foot and enters the crown of our head.

Nectar Descending

We imagine this nectar seeping into every cell and tissue of our body. It fills the area behind our eyes and seeps into our ears, nasal passages, throats, the roots of our teeth, and the gray matter of our brains. It finds its way into the space between our muscles. Our veins and arteries run with it. It saturates our bones and marrow. We imagine this with great clarity while we recite the mantra.

At the same time, we imagine that all the deeds that we have ever done that harmed ourselves and others, all our guilt, bad feelings, sicknesses of mind and body, are all being flushed out, leaving through every pore and orifice in the form of muddy soot or sludge, like ink mixed with ash. The soot seeps down the outside and inside of our body, down to our toes, and continues descending to the bowels of the earth, where it is neutralized.

Nectar descending functions to purify and to transform. With the help and blessings of all the buddhas, who are manifesting as Vajrasattva, and inspired by our genuine remorse, we ask—of ourselves and of the deities—that purification be granted. The effort, intention, and motivation must come from our side.

If you have a physical ailment, such as a lung infection, a tumor, a toothache, or a back problem, you can bring your attention to the area of illness or discomfort as the nectar descends. Maintain the recitation, but allow your awareness to stay with the ailment. Then you should imagine the nectar washing this area, and imagine the illness leaving your body in the form of muddy soot. This practice can be very beneficial for physical ailments, but please do not substitute it for medical advice or prescriptions. The effectiveness of purification depends on our intentions and motivations, but also on our capacities. Although the potential for what we can accomplish is limitless, at this point our capacities may be limited.

The Paramitas

I want to add that any activity done with the intention of helping others will offset negative karma. Just as light dispels darkness, or generosity dispels stinginess, virtuous behavior dispels nonvirtuous behavior. All the paramitas—generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom—remove negativities. The same is true for the ten virtues: refraining from killing, stealing, lying, and so forth. Any of the virtues that accumulate good karma will simultaneously counter or dissolve negative karma. So although we work with nectar in our Vajrayana-imagination ngondro practice, it is not the only antidote to our negativities.

Buy One, Get Four Free

We enlist Vajrasattva for the benefits of purification, but there are multiple positive results of this practice.

Shamata

Imagining the deity helps cultivate our shamata practice. We can use a general image of the deity or select any particular aspect within the image as support for our awareness. Or we can use the sensation of nectar descending into our body, or the sensation of soot oozing out of our pores, or we can use the sound of the mantra. We can also allow the mind to move away from a specific object and rest in objectless awareness.

In general, all these practices are about cultivating awareness, because in our daily life it is awareness that brings about the change that can reorient our life away from confusion and toward clarity. We cannot engage in that process without meditative awareness, so there is nothing more beneficial than this.

Bodhichitta

Because we set our intention with bodhichitta, we cultivate the good karma that comes with aspiring to help all beings attain enlightenment. This alone creates virtue and is an antidote to our negativities.

Vipashyana

We cultivate vipashyana practice in the process of imagining Vajrasattva. Using our imaginative powers to invoke and dissolve the image of Vajrasattva provides what we need to know about how our mind works in everyday life. We continually compose and dissolve realities. Yet in ordinary life, we are not encouraged to explore this. We need a kind of laboratory of the mind in which we can creatively experiment, and imagination practice provides this laboratory and helps us recognize that form is never separate from emptiness. This is the union of emptiness and clarity, and the recognition of this union comes from wisdom. Wisdom recognizes emptiness as well as the union of form (clarity) and emptiness.

The recognition that physical forms arise from emptiness, and the recognition of the union of emptiness and clarity, requires wisdom. And the wisdom that is brought forth through this recognition further cultivates wisdom, deepening and stabilizing it. The awareness that we access through shamata supports this recognition.

Merit

We accumulate merit and virtue through the aspiration to purify ourselves for others. This tends to relate to specific actions. When we add the bodhichitta aspiration, we expand our own motivation to purify ourselves in order to recognize our own true nature and to bring an end to suffering for ourselves and all sentient beings.

Mantra Pronunciation

When we begin mantra practice, it's important to enunciate the words of the mantra, even though it slows us down. We do this for as long as it takes to absorb the sounds, words, and feelings. At first, one round of a mala—108 recitations—may take one hour. That's fine. Don't rush. After we get the hang of it, we can do mantra recitations very fast. The words should remain distinct, even though they may sound blurred. And as we learn from Atisha, mantra blessings do not depend on perfect pronunciation.

One time when Atisha was in Tibet, he developed boils on his neck. These boils had grown to an uncomfortable size, and the great Indian adept sought relief at a big monastery where he asked the monks to do a specific purification ceremony for him. This included a very long mantra, and mantra syllables are only written in Sanskrit. The monks knew that Atisha was an expert Sanskrit scholar; nonetheless they set about reading Sanskrit words that had been transliterated into Tibetan. This would be like Westerners reading Tibetan prayers in the alphabet of their own language, and I know how funny this can sound.

When Atisha heard the Tibetan monks repeating the Sanskrit syllables, it made him laugh so hard that his boils burst and he was completely cured. "The pronunciation of the mantra was not correct," Atisha concluded, "but the sounds have the correct blessings."

Atisha (980–1054), Indian adept and scholar.

Recitation

The completion of one round on the mala of the Vajrasattva mantra—meaning 108 recitations—does not necessarily have to coincide with the descent of the nectar. Imagining the flow of nectar from the top of your body to the bottom can coincide with several rounds of the mala, such as 300 or 400 repetitions. Or one round of the mala can extend over several visualizations of the nectar descending. Experiment and see what works. This correlation might change naturally. However, the 10,000 or 111,000 accumulations assigned by your ngondro guide refer only to mantra repetitions, not to the cycles of nectar descending.

Expanding the Practice to Others

To expand the practice to others, we imagine the field of sentient beings that stand with us for the refuge vow, but now imagine that above each

head sits Vajrasattva. Or you can imagine yourself as the representative of all sentient beings. Whatever supplications we make, all beings make; what accomplishments we achieve, all beings achieve; whatever blessings we receive, all beings receive.

We can also direct this practice toward a particular person. If we have a connection to someone who is sick or suffering emotionally, we can imagine Vajrasattva above that person's head. As we say the recitation, the nectar descends into that person's body and cleanses that person's obscurations. This is good to do for those whose mental or physical suffering has been caused by our own past behavior.

Becoming Vajrasattva

As the negativities ooze from our body, this cleansing transforms us into a rainbowlike wisdom body, dissolving any distinction between the nectar and us, and between Vajrasattva and us. It's a kind of alchemical process that absorbs the heart, arms, nails, fingers, everything. We no longer experience our body as blood and bones, but as light and energy. And when we finish the power of the antidote, we feel, "I am Vajrasattva!"

We do not become pure during the process of nectar descending. Dissolving the impurities allows us to consciously connect with our original purity. This is an especially important point. In every deity practice, becoming one with the deity has this purifying effect, but it's especially critical here because we are dealing specifically with actions that, in many cases, have left us identifying ourselves as "bad." We think, "I am a bad person, my parents told me I was bad. Badness is in my DNA, it's fixed." What comes next? "I can never change. I cannot overcome this badness. It will be with me until I die. This is my bad karma." Getting attached to this kind of damaging identification creates huge obstacles.

With nectar descending, we have a taste of renewal. We have new possibilities. Combining these methods with faith and aspiration, we gain confidence that we can accomplish what we direct our mind to do. We begin to believe that we can conquer the power of hopelessness. With this fresh new possibility, we engage the fourth power, the power of resolve.

The Power of Resolve

Once we have completed our recitations for the practice session, then we consider the power of resolve. At this point, we have used the support of Vajrasattva to investigate harmful actions. The power of remorse has allowed us to acknowledge whatever suffering we have caused, and the power of the antidote has deliberately been invoked to cleanse our body, speech, and mind of accumulated negativities. Now, with the blessings of the buddhas and the determination to unblock the path to our own liberation, we engage the power of resolve.

At this point, we are working to stabilize our orientation from negative patterns to positive ones. Right now we feel pure, full of optimism and courage, and we don't want to slide backward or allow this virtue to leak out. Perhaps you can say to Vajrasattva, "Please forgive me for my past actions. I will really try to never repeat those things. I promise. Please bless me that I may never make those mistakes again." Be sincere. Make this your own intimate encounter with Vajrasattva—who is none other than yourself. You are making a promise to your own perfected self to do the best you can. We cannot just think, "Oh, wonderful! Now that I have confessed and repented and wiped the slate clean, I can start my hurtful, careless behavior all over again." Or "Now that I've been cleansed, I will naturally no longer want to commit these acts again."

We may actually commit some negative action again. In fact, in our unenlightened, samsaric state, we probably will. But we aspire not to, and we appeal to the power of resolve to hold firm. We sincerely pray that this fresh start will turn us in a new direction, and we can imagine that Vajrasattva speaks back to us: "Now you are completely purified of all your negativity." Don't be shy about having a conversation with a deity. Make it personal and meaningful. In *The Way of the Bodhisattva,* at the end of the chapter on confession, Shantideva says:

> I pray you, guides and guardians of the world,
> To take me as I am, an evil man.
> And all these actions, evil as they are,
> I promise I will never do again.
> (2–65)

Shantideva, eighth-century Indian scholar, author of *The Way of the Bodhisattva.*

Tough Love

Let's say you've focused on one of your current bad habits, such as smoking cigarettes, which harms your lungs, shortens your life, and reduces your capacity to help sentient beings. Or perhaps you have a pattern of self-aggrandizement. Instead of reporting, "I went for a two-mile walk," you say, "I went for a five-mile hike"; or sitting in an airplane on the tarmac for forty minutes turns into a drama about a four-hour delay. Without food. "It was hot, airless." And later on, maybe some babies were crying. Every time the story is retold, the situation becomes worse, and the ego-fixation becomes more solid.

In each case, you may investigate the insecurities that make you reach for external reassurances, such as lighting a cigarette or adding more hats to your head with your tall tales. But the point is that by choosing a current destructive habit, the power of resolve can take on the

quality of "tough love." We do not want to beat ourselves up; from a pragmatic view, berating ourselves doesn't work. Still, we really want to break this pattern, and out of compassion for ourselves and those we affect, we apply some muscular discipline to our efforts. Will this happen overnight? Probably not. But Vajrasattva practice and awareness meditation can drive a wedge that will slowly isolate the habit to the point where a lasting break becomes possible.

Sometimes if the act seems isolated, with no threat of repetition, the power of resolve might lose its meaning. However, we need to examine not just the specific circumstances, but also the behavior of body, speech, and mind, which may reappear in other forms. Let's say that we are in a car accident. The chances of that happening again are slight. But if the accident was influenced by a distracted mind, the conditions of that mind may resurface and become the cause of other activities that create harm. Nowadays people drive cars, conduct trains, and fly airplanes, all the while talking and texting, looking at iPods and iPads, and listening to music. They are completely distracted from the alertness and awareness that would keep them and others out of harm's way.

Alternating Meditation Techniques

It's best to start any practice with a heartfelt contemplation of what we are doing, and to hold this until our mind and body have settled into the feeling of the practice. After that, it may feel quite normal to gently move into shamata practice. However, at various points in the practice it is always beneficial to return to contemplating what we are doing and why. This can be combined with shamata.

For example, when we imagine the nectar descending, our awareness stays with the image of Vajrasattva above our head and the nectar seeping into our body, and so forth. Simultaneously, we can think about our motivations, intentions, and aspirations. Again, this is not an intellectual process, but rather we are contemplating from our heart to invoke the presence of the deity. We maintain the recitations and we may be using the image as the object of awareness, but we can also allow for a contemplative understanding of the practice.

Shamata with Object

We can move from a contemplative inquiry to shamata with object. We can bring forth the image of Vajrasattva and use that to support our recognition of awareness. Or we can use the nectar itself. Because of the heightened physical sensation of the nectar seeping into every cell of our body, we can use sensation to support our recognition of awareness. If awareness with object becomes tiring or boring and our mind continuously wanders, then we can switch to open awareness—shamata without object.

Open Awareness, or Shamata without Object

With open awareness, we maintain the recitations and continue to count them, but we do not rest our mind on the supports. We rest our mind on the recognition of awareness itself. Sometimes the shift from awareness with object to awareness without object happens effortlessly. That's fine.

Bodhichitta

With bodhichitta practice, we can drop the visualization and just maintain the aspiration to help others. We may think, "May I purify my negativities and obscurations with the intention to help others purify their negativities and obscurations so that they may become enlightened." Or "I acknowledge all my nonvirtuous behavior and hope that all beings can do the same," and so forth. Here the emphasis stays with helping the other.

Emptiness

You can also choose to work with emptiness, either through vipashyana practice or nature-of-mind practice. Here we contemplate clarity, which is the essential quality of form, in union with emptiness. We have used our imagination to bring forth Vajrasattva and watch the nectar descending. We use this mental activity to examine the union of form and emptiness in all phenomena while we maintain the recitations. You can ask, "Who is being purified of what? I am emptiness,

my actions are emptiness, and the objects of my supplications are emptiness." If you rest in emptiness at this point, then it becomes absolute practice.

Whether or not you do this within the sessions, I suggest you practice emptiness meditation at the end of the session. If you've received pointing-out instructions on the nature of mind, you can just drop into recognition and rest naturally in pure awareness.

You can alternate these meditation styles as often as you like. You do not have to do them in any particular order, and you can do one more than another. As my teachers stressed: the point of using alternating styles is to keep the practice alive and vibrant, and not to just go through the practice in a mechanical or rote way. And whatever style you choose, you always maintain and keep count of the recitations.

Ending the Session

At the end of the practice session, once Vajrasattva confirms your purity and honest intentions, he dissolves into light and merges with the nectar light of your own body. You recognize that you have become one with Vajrasattva. With this unity, you can perceive Vajrasattva practice in terms of emptiness. You now realize that this unity reflects both your own essential emptiness as well as Vajrasattva's, for the merging of both these forms can only arise from emptiness. Now you realize that your destructive actions as well as your confessions also reflect emptiness, and you can contemplate the absence of any inherent, fixed identity.

At this point, we experience the entire process—from relative to absolute, from form to emptiness—as insubstantial, dreamlike, and illusory. We don't have to do any particular kind of meditation. Just merge your mind with Vajrasattva's and then relax. Let your mind rest in this recognition and sit for at least a few minutes in this state.

Let's say that we have set aside one hour for Vajrasattva practice. I suggest you complete the formal practice in about fifty minutes and leave the last five or ten minutes to sit quietly with no visualization or

mantra. As you come out of emptiness practice, rejoice in the feeling of purification. Think to yourself, "Today I did a good job."

Once we have realized the absolute level, the relative or conventional sense of purification is no longer necessary. But it is very important not to get ahead of ourselves. Although we acknowledge the absolute view, and incorporate both the absolute and relative perspectives into our practice session, until the time comes when we have truly stabilized the absolute view, we cannot disregard the relative practice.

The experience of having removed the suffering of disease, anguish, and bad karma, and relieved stress or dissolved trauma, leaves us feeling like a rainbow, filled with light, cleansed, vibrant, vivid, without the weight of substance. Holding guilt or trauma in our body can feel as heavy as a physical weight. Now we feel youthfully buoyant, healthy, strong, and free from the fear of death and dying. Resolve feels totally workable to us in this state, and we have confidence in directing ourselves toward activities that create good karma.

While practicing Vajrasattva, some people continue to feel the effects in their dreams. For example, dreams of bathing or swimming in a river extend the process of cleansing into our sleeping hours, as do dreams of flying, which express a continued lightness of being. Wearing new clothes may express regeneration. Sometimes we might dream about falling in the mud, too! Either way, we should not be attached to our dreams.

Even if we repeat some bad habit, even if we make some new problem for others or ourselves, the positive effect of our effort is never lost. We have set our direction, and however many times we trip, we will eventually accomplish our journey. Maybe we are not 100 percent purified, but still we arrive at mandala practice with a newfound sense that the grossest negativities have been sifted out of our mind stream. It's as if we have poured our mind through a strainer of awareness, enabling us to eliminate the most toxic obscurations. Feeling cleansed of our negativity—or at the very least, lightened by having initiated this process—allows us to arrive revitalized on the doorstep of mandala practice, an emptied vehicle ready to be refilled by the two positive accumulations: merit and wisdom.

10. The Third Unique Practice

Mandala: The Accumulation of Wisdom and Merit

My father used to tell me that offering garbage with the mind of letting go expresses more generosity than giving away gold with the expectation of being thanked. To make his point, he told me about the Tenth Karmapa, Choying Dorje, who had been invited to China by the emperor.

In old Tibet, whenever the great lamas had reason to travel, they often stopped to give teachings as they passed through villages and towns. In this case, the emperor's invitation had come on short notice, denying opportunities for teachings, but the people still wanted to present offerings to the Karmapa. In one village, a group of peasants gathered to make plans for their offerings, but after they had itemized their collective belongings and calculated what foods, animals, and blankets they needed to stay alive through the winter, they concluded that they had nothing to give. They felt so hopeless. Then one villager thought of something they could afford to part with: kitchen scraps! So when the Karmapa and his retinue passed through their village, they mixed dust and rubble with kitchen scraps and joyfully tossed their offerings to him.

Since our kleshas and karma come through body, speech, and mind, and since they are caused by body, speech, and mind, ngondro practices purify body, speech, and mind—but with differences in emphasis. Prostrations place the emphasis of purification on the body, while mantra

recitation places the emphasis on speech. With mandala practice, the emphasis rests with purifying the mind of fixed, limited, fabricated identities, and the prime agent that helps us accomplish this goal is the activity of imagination. We use imagination to experience immeasurable generosity, so infinite and boundless that it reshapes our reality. We imagine entire world systems so vast and complex that in the face of them, we cannot hold on to our ordinary sense of the world or of ourselves. Cultivating the mind of letting go purifies the mind of grasping.

The Accumulation of Merit and Wisdom

Grasping and fixation arise from the mind, and therefore cannot be eliminated through body and speech alone. The mind of letting go has the capacity to cut the root of ego-clinging; the activity of letting go accumulates merit. And by letting go, we gain access to our own immense inner wealth, which has never been depleted. We begin to glimpse our own treasures, and this initiates the accumulation of wisdom.

In order to transform ordinary giving into letting go of our egocentric habits, we create entire universes and give those away. We give away the stars and the sun, the oceans, forests, and mountains made of jewels. We generate the mind of letting go by giving away what we cannot conceive of owning in the first place. We allow imagination to travel so far beyond conventional ideas of generosity that it breaks our associations with socially sanctioned concepts of virtuous behavior. With good intention, motivation, and bodhichitta, we offer our own body, blood, and bones. We offer our emanations of mind and we offer our defilements, such as our anger and our greed.

There is nothing that is too bad or too good to be offered, because no thing, thought, or object has intrinsic value. Whatever ensnares us in grasping—an emotion, a sports car, an enemy, or a loved one—makes an appropriate offering. We cultivate the heart of giving and the mind of letting go, for ourselves and for all sentient beings. Bodhichitta motivates this practice, as it does with every practice. The process of purifying our mind includes all minds. Generosity of heart includes all hearts,

for the benefit of all beings including ourselves, to attain the ultimate happiness.

Many people think of merit as a kind of gold-star system: we get one gold star for this good deed and another for that, until the scoreboard guarantees our liberation. Yet generally "good deed" is defined by cultural values and reinforces the ego by solidifying the dualistic view that "I" am doing this good deed for "the other." The whole activity depends on cultural conditioning and ego-clinging. Although we might joke about this gold-star approach, dismantling it takes enormous effort. People who have practiced for years still get enticed by behavior that "appears" virtuous to themselves and others. The deed itself may be beneficial, but the attitude hinders the process of eliminating duality or transforming the mind.

To enlarge our understanding, let's view merit through causes and conditions. The activities of body, speech, and mind affect body, speech, and mind. That's the law of karma. We can also say our activities condition body, speech, and mind. Let's say we are conditioning our body by lifting weights. Slowly we achieve something that we could not do before, and this increases our capability and confidence. Merit works like this, but we are conditioning the mind, creating the habit of undertaking beneficial activity. The more we train with the conditioning agent of merit, the more natural and abundant our capacity for benefiting others becomes. What we put in our mind affects the capacity of the mind. All our activities condition us for what lies ahead.

This might sound like a linear process, but conditioning works in a circular way. For example, we already discussed the confusion caused by not recognizing impermanence. Yet waking up to this recognition does not just pop up from complete ignorance; rather it comes about through merit. Our practices and intelligent investigations condition our mind so that we can recognize impermanence. Creating the karmic circumstances for this recognition may also come about through merit, and further increase the possibilities for merit. At some point, we might be able to recognize that our fleeting moments of happiness are contingent on change, and this insight may save us a lot of anguish; this too

comes about through merit. If we just claim responsibility for suddenly arriving at these great insights on our own, then first we are denying the truth of karma and the law of interdependence, and second we are mistakenly crediting our insights to our own separate ego.

The point is not to divert attention from doing good deeds, but to introduce merit as an alive, fluid quality of mind. We want to break the habit of associating merit with a specific deed fixed in relative time and space. And to recognize that although mandala practice accumulates merit, the fact that we are doing this practice manifests the merit that we have already accumulated.

As a child, I thought that my father's approval was the best indication that I was accumulating merit, so I was always trying to figure out how to please him. I often went to his room in the afternoons, and if he had no visitors, he'd be facing the window from his raised box and looking at the sky. Very relaxed. I would climb up and sit next to him and try to meditate. I wanted him to notice my perfect posture and relaxed mind. Honestly, my posture was as rigid as a yardstick, and my mind was pretty uptight.

One afternoon we were sitting together, my father completely natural, with me bolt upright next to him. In a very quiet voice my father said, "You know, Ahme, the very best way to accumulate merit is to realize emptiness."

I kind of slumped over, defeated. Then I got really confused, wondering how doing nothing could help others. "You could just sit and meditate on emptiness and do nothing," I told my father, "and not pray for others, and not care for sick people. Then no one would get food, and who would benefit?"

"The causes of bad karma are ignorance," my father told me. "Ignorance is not realizing the true nature of reality; it is not realizing no-self, emptiness, or the nature of mind. If ignorance remains, then duality remains, concepts remain, and negativity gets stuck. This is samsara, the ways that we cling to false notions of reality; and when we function from our misperceptions and cling to them, we continue to create suffering for ourselves and others."

My father tried to explain to me that without understanding empti-

ness, we ignorantly attribute to our mind and body a solid sense of an individual, separate, distinct self. That self is always trying to fulfill the needs and desires of the grasping ego, but it only keeps us spinning in cycles of dissatisfaction and keeps us separate from "the other."

"Emptiness is like light," continued my father. "Like sun. Although you are thinking, 'Nothing, nothing, nothing,' actually nothing is everything. If you understand that this nothing is emptiness, then wisdom blossoms. Wisdom accumulates merit because it dispels the darkness of ignorance. What happens," he asked me, "when you light a candle in your room at night?"

"It makes the darkness go away," I told him.

"That is like wisdom," he said.

To repeat a most important point: in ultimate reality, which is the same as our buddha nature, and the same as the absolute, there are no obscurations, no bad karma, no one to supplicate, nobody to supplicate to, nothing to be purified, and nothing to be accumulated. Everything is perfect exactly as it is. Fantastic.

The obvious question for the student is: "Why practice? Why make mandala offerings to purify the mind if the mind is already pure and perfect?" Because we do not recognize ultimate reality. We do not have the wisdom to recognize that we are perfect. This is the obscuration, and this is why we practice.

As part of the formal mandala practice, we accumulate merit and wisdom by making offerings of the relative and absolute. We accumulate merit through the generosity of offering such things as planets, stars, gold, houses, our own body, and our loved ones, and we accumulate wisdom by offering the emptiness of all those forms. As we let go of grasping and ego-fixation, we accumulate merit and wisdom. Letting go and accumulating; letting go and accumulating. Purification and accumulation happen at the same time, inseparably.

The Many Meanings of Mandala

The word *mandala* has several uses. "Mandala practice" can refer to this aspect of ngondro practice. There is also a category of pictorial

representation called mandala, used as a visual aid for specific meditation practices. Then there is the ritual object—a circular plate—called a mandala, which supports the mandala practice. In all cases, *mandala* suggests an all-encompassing universe or a sacred circle—a space of infinite fullness, an edgeless realm with no beginning, no end, no inside, no outside. This very absence of fixedness expresses the absolute. The imagery within the mandala represents a perfected universe that reflects the enlightened wisdom of the buddhas—or what we call pure perception.

By any conventional measure, the mandala that we are about to create represents a universe of inconceivable, unsurpassable splendor and purity. With our own imagination, we create a fabulous, magical mandala sphere. Applying the self-antidote, we use concepts to go beyond concepts. We use imagination—the relative tool of our relative mind—to glimpse the absolute. Imagination becomes the supreme means for exploring the subtle strategies of perception.

Mandala universes contrast with the conventional views of a world constructed through limited projections. Take a two-dimensional map of the world: it has no relationship to direct experience. No one has ever seen this world, although millions of people, through the habit of collective cultural karma, will promise that it's a "real" representation. With mandalas, stylized and symbolic imagery replaces our conventional representation of the world, visually signaling that our mandala universe is anything but ordinary. In order to let go of our deep-rooted grasping to ourselves and to the habitual patterns that we use to navigate the world around us, we need an extraordinary jolt: with the support of a new world, we experiment with a new way of being.

The Mind of Letting Go

The gift of one grain or of one million dollars might equally reflect the mind of letting go, or it may equally reflect a withholding, grasping, and attached mind. We may give to increase name and fame. With enough money, we can have hospitals and libraries named after ourselves. Donations to medical research or educational facilities can produce

good results, but charity may become a way to gain publicity, praise, and social esteem, which solidifies pride and grasping—the afflictions that keep us stuck in samsara. We give up a seat on the train for an old person, thinking, "Oh, I am such a good bodhisattva." Or we give to make others jealous, or we give ten thousand dollars to a dharma center and think, "I am so holy." Or we give to impress or to be admired, as in giving a dinner party.

Think about the past few times you gave something away or performed an act that suggested generosity. Then analyze the situation and see if you can honestly identify the various agendas leading up to this activity. Letting go has nothing to do with financial value or even necessarily with giving things away. We may give a lot, but rarely with the intention or purpose of letting go.

A Handful of Dirt

The twelfth-century master Geshe Ben, legendary for his rigorous honesty and for the humorous stories about the way he practiced, lived in a mountain hermitage built into a rock. From an opening in the outside wall, he could look down upon the whole valley. One day he noticed a man coming up the path from far below. A little while later he returned to the window and recognized the man as his very own patron. He immediately set about cleaning his room. He dusted the shrine, shook out his shrine cloth, and cleaned the water-offering bowls.

Suddenly he stopped and thought: "What am I doing! I am just cleaning up to impress my patron. This is nothing but a display of ego." He went outside, gathered dirt in his hands, came back in and threw it all over his shrine. Then he sat outside and waited.

Soon his patron arrived, bearing offerings of delicious sweets. Geshe Ben greeted him very respectfully and invited him inside for tea. Once they were seated inside, the patron looked around and with a note of alarm asked, "Why is this place so dirty? What happened to your shrine?"

Geshe Ben explained that he had caught himself cleaning for purely self-centered reasons. All he had wanted to give was a good impression

of himself, so he threw dirt around the room to clean out the bad smell of fake holiness. This really impressed the patron, who repeated the story to many friends, and soon word of Geshe Ben's impeccable character circulated throughout the land. Upon hearing this story, one revered lama said, "That handful of dirt was the best offering ever made in Tibet!"

Remembering Geshe Ben might expand how we think about offerings, and help us understand that the more personal and intimate we can be with ourselves, the more effective our practice.

The Seven-Point Mandala Offering

Mandala practices vary from simple to quite elaborate. We'll go over a basic and somewhat abbreviated version called the seven-point mandala offering.

We begin in the seated position in front of our shrines. We use two mandala plates, which are usually made of brass, copper, or silver. It's best to choose material in accord with our finances. There's no need to be extravagant, but don't be stingy. Poor Tibetans use slabs of wood or flat rocks, and that's fine.

You place one plate, the accomplishment mandala, on the shrine; the offering mandala is held in your hand. Start by cleansing the accomplishment mandala. We hold this in the left hand. Then, take a small pinch of grain—usually rice—between the thumb, forefinger, and middle finger of your right hand. Or you can use just your thumb and forefinger. Holding the grain, we use the ball of our wrist to wipe the plate in a clockwise direction; and at the same time, think that all the negativities and obscurations that have been accumulated through ego-clinging are being cleansed for ourselves and for all sentient beings in order that they may attain liberation. At the moment that you begin to move your right hand in a circular motion around the mandala, start reciting the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra. Our motivation is for our mind and the minds of all beings to be purified and cleansed, just as our plate is being purified and cleansed.

After this, sprinkle a teaspoon of water on the surface. On top, place

five offering heaps, usually of grain. You can also use the more elaborate *torma,* the Tibetan offering made of roasted barley and butter. One heap of grain or one torma goes in the middle of the plate, and the others are placed at the rim in each of the four cardinal directions.

This accomplishment mandala is placed on your shrine, symbolizing the immeasurable mansion called the mandala palace. Each of its four walls is of equal dimensions, and each has a gate at its center. The traditional literature describes many details, which you don't have to be overly concerned with as long as you have the feeling of a colossal palace—some hugely inflated combination of the Taj Mahal and Versailles, topped by a grand dome—but with no bathrooms, bedrooms, or kitchens. Again imagine that it is like the moon's reflection in the lake or like a rainbow, with nothing substantial or dense about it.

Inside this rainbow palace—as if sky exists inside the palace itself—are the same deities that appear in the refuge tree, grouped in the same configurations. There's no tree or lake, but we imagine Vajradhara in the center, symbolized by the central heap. The other four heaps symbolize Shakyamuni Buddha to the right of Vajradhara, the noble sangha to Vajradhara's left, the dharma behind him, and the yidams in front. There is no heap for the dharma protectors because just as they are not on the actual refuge tree, they are not on the plate but stand guard at the four gates.

To these enlightened beings, we make our offerings. Once again, it's more important to invoke the vivid presence of the deities than to imagine a perfect picture. Why do we offer everything to the buddhas and to the deities? From a relative view, these extraordinary, sublime beings are the worthy objects of our devotion and supplications. Their wisdom inspires our offerings. Seeing the buddha outside helps us connect with our own inner buddha, since every time we practice the mandala offering, we end by merging our mind with the buddhas to whom we are making offerings. At this stage in our practice, ordinary beings do not inspire us in the same way. At some point we might see the essential equality of all beings, as my father did with the beggar and the king's minister. For now, we start from where we are.

Making offerings to the buddhas also puts us in relationship with the

buddhas. Once again, we are making a connection to the buddhas and asking for their help and blessings, so that the cycle of our supplications and their blessings generates a boundless generosity that benefits all beings. Don't forget that we are doing this to help all beings attain enlightenment. That's from the relative view.

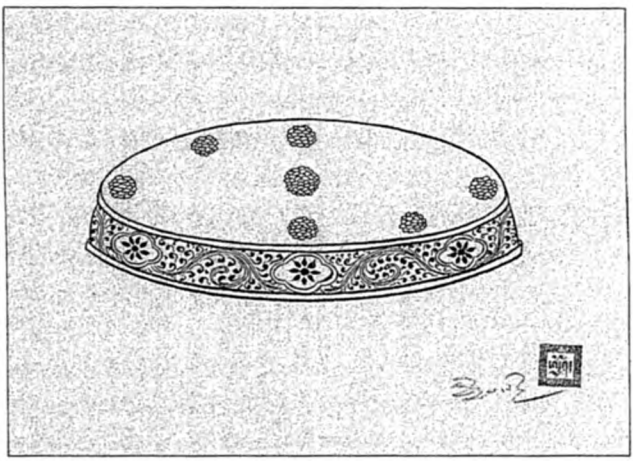
How do we understand our offerings to the buddhas from the absolute view? We can ask: "Who is offering what to whom?" Asking this question while making the offerings provides glimpses of emptiness; from the ultimate view, this wisdom is the greatest blessing of all. We will review these aspects with the stages of the practice activity.

In addition to the mandala of accomplishment, we also place on the shrine seven offerings, such as cookies, candies, incense, lamps or candles, flowers, shells, fruits or grains. This display of abundance or enrichment supports and encourages our own generosity. In addition to the accomplishment mandala, these offerings represent the fulfillment of our efforts. We use the "accomplishment" to enrich our efforts and help move us from confusion to clarity. We have something right before our eyes to remind us that our efforts are attainable. We take the fruition as path, using our goal as a tool.

These offerings should also be in accord with your finances. Don't be stingy, but don't go broke buying extravagant delicacies. Remember, we are working with our mind. If you can afford new rice each day, wonderful; if not, add a few grains of new rice to the rice used previously. Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was such a poor child that when he did mandala practice, he could not afford even one grain of rice.

Next cleanse the offering mandala plate as you did with the one on the shrine. For the offering itself, we usually use rice. But do not sprinkle water on the rice to make it stick together as we did for the heaps. Sometimes we soak the rice in saffron-infused water, and when it's dry we mix it with the seeds of precious spices; or we might mix grains with medicinal herbs or with tiny flecks of jewels or colored stone, such as turquoise or coral. Hold this substance, let's say rice, in your right hand, ready to place it on the offering mandala. Mandala plates are rounded on the top and the rice is placed on this curved side, which means that it slides off. To catch the grains, tie a piece of cloth, or large

apron, around your waist, covering your knees to make a kind of basin in your lap into which the rice falls. The cloth can also be placed in a large basket, and the basket can then be placed in your lap. Then during the practice session, scoop the rice from your lap—or basket—and use it again and again.



Mandala offering plate with heaps of rice.

In your left hand, in addition to the mandala plate, you hold a mala to keep count of the mantra recitations. These days some people find it more convenient to use a small handheld mechanical counter, and this is fine, too.

To cleanse the mandala plate, hold it in your left hand, and in your right hand take a pinch of grain. Holding the grain, cleanse the disk by making a clockwise rotation with the ball of your wrist, and at the same time repeat the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra: OM VAJRASATTVA / SAMAYAM . . .Try to time it so that for one recitation of the mantra, your wrist has circled the plate three times. For this duration, we aspire to become enlightened so that we may lead all beings to enlightenment by cleansing our own mind, and the minds of all beings, of confusion and dualistic perception. With the completion of the recitation and wiping the plate clockwise three times, we drop the rice onto the center of the plate.

Imagining Mount Meru

At the moment that we drop the rice onto the mandala plate, the plate transforms into a spacious, flat, golden land surrounded by an ocean ringed by iron mountains. From the golden surface of the ocean rises the four-sided Mount Meru, which exists at the center of an inconceivably vast cosmos. At its base are four square platforms that become successively smaller as they ascend. The sides of the fourth platform increase as Mount Meru rises, making the flat, square top much larger than the base. Its eastern side is made of pure crystal, its southern side of sapphires, its western side of rubies, and its northern side of emeralds. The colored lights glowing from each jeweled face radiate out to the cardinal directions. We create all this with our imagination, so don't try to make any logical sense of how to construct a world system out of a heap of rice.

In addition to the central heap of rice that becomes Mount Meru, we place four more heaps at the periphery, which become four continents in the ocean that surrounds Mount Meru. Comparing the locations to a clock, the continents are placed at twelve o'clock, three, six, and nine. In between nine and twelve and in between three and six, we place two more heaps for a sun and moon. We now have seven offering heaps. We imagine that each continent takes on the color of the light radiating from the side of Mount Meru that it faces.

The entire mandala universe is filled with traditional auspicious symbols that represent the activity of the buddhas. These include the parasol, which symbolizes protection; the conch, which symbolizes the resonant sound of dharma teachings; the eight-spoked wheel of dharma, which symbolizes the Buddha's turning of the dharma wheel and the capacity of the Buddha's teaching to bring all beings to realization. In accordance with custom, ancient Indian and Tibetan symbols of royal wealth also fill the mandala, the so-called precious offerings for the kingdom, such as wish-fulfilling cows, wish-fulfilling gems, fertile fields, jewels, horses, and elephants. These traditional representations of richness and sense pleasures can be replaced or expanded to include contemporary symbols of wealth and luxury: Rolls-Royces, iPads,

five-star hotels, national parks, organic blueberries, yachts—whatever strikes us as especially lavish and pleasurable we place on the steps of Mount Meru and on the continents.

If we wish to make the most vast, elaborate offering possible, then we imagine that from the offering mandala plate in our left hand radiates a halo of multicolored rainbow light. At the tip of each stream of light sits another mandala with the same inconceivable abundance as the one we just imagined. This mandala also has a halo of rainbow light, and on the tip of each stream sits another mandala, and so forth until the offering becomes billions, even trillions of world light-systems. And we, the practitioner, sit quietly and composed at the center of this fabulously rich, resplendent, self-created universe.

The Practice Activity

For the actual practice, we start in the seven-point posture. Anchoring the practice within the physical body is always important. The benefits of the practice will be affected by whether you sit upright, alert, and energized, or you slump and stay out of balance.

You have already purified the offering plate and are holding it in your left hand. You have an apron tied around your waist to catch the grains. The shrine holds many offerings. To the best of your ability, stabilize your imagination of the mandala palace with the six objects of your supplications, and stabilize the offering of the Mount Meru universe with all its abundant riches. With your right hand, pick up a handful of rice or other offering grains.

The degree of complexity for the visualization will depend on which liturgy your teacher suggests. We will work here with the four-line prayer and offering below.

> Sprinkling the earth with perfume and strewing it with flowers,
> Adorning it with Mount Meru, the four continents, the sun,
> and the moon,
> Imagining this as a buddha realm I offer it
> So all beings may enjoy this pure realm.

As you recite the prayer, hold the offering plate in your left hand, and with your right hand scoop up a fistful of rice from your lap. With your thumb on top of your fist, move your hand counterclockwise around the plate, releasing a bit of rice from the bottom of your fist as you move it around the rim. Then release a small pile in the center, then move to the top of the plate (twelve o'clock) for the first continent, then to three o'clock for the second continent, and continue for the six and nine o'clock placements. Then release a little mound of rice between nine and twelve, and lastly between three and six for the sun and the moon.

Most of the rice that you place on the plate will slide off into your lap. Once you make your offering, whatever is left on the plate can be wiped off with your wrist before starting again. This all goes into your lap. Then you scoop up another fistful and repeat the recitation.

It's not really possible to learn this from reading alone—you'll need to see it yourself to get the feel for it—but this should provide a basic idea of how to do the offering. Your ngondro guide or guru will indicate the number of recitations needed to complete the practice.

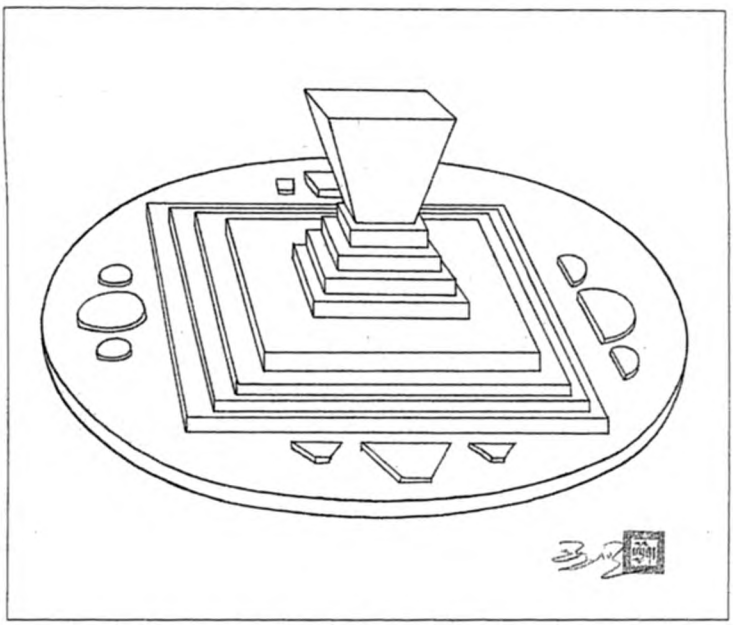
This describes the essential practice activity, but we will go over aspects of imagination and motivation before going through the three stages of the practice—outer, inner, and secret offerings—which are all done as the recitation and grain offerings continue. Counting the recitations continues with every stage.

Working with Mount Meru

In ancient history, some sages presented the exact height of Mount Meru and described its depth in terms of a specific number of leagues beneath the sea. This communicated the mistaken impression of a conventionally visible phenomenon. Adding to the misunderstanding of a fixed form are the structural diagrams for the mandala palace with their parallels to the royal palaces of ancient India. The "offerings for the kingdom" is another reference to ancient India, but as we already said, these items can be replaced with our own versions of luxury.

Many modern people say, "Oh, I can't relate to this mandala or to

Mount Meru because you know, Rinpoche, it seems so stuck in ancient India, and today we know so much more about the universe and the geography of planet Earth than people did thousands of years ago," and so forth. They think this visualization contradicts modern knowledge. But we are not talking about buying a plane ticket to Mount Meru or about climbing it like Mount Everest. We are speaking of emanations of mind.



Mandala universe with Mount Meru at its center.

The traditional symbolic description of Mount Meru deliberately contradicts our image of a "real" mountain. Its linear geometric shape diverges from what might be construed as "ordinary." The water and continents are also highly stylized. Even if some aspects of the Mount Meru imagery allude to Indian history, its purpose is to transport us into new realms of experience, and the absence of any image that corresponds to an idea or preconception of "mountain" reinforces the mandala's distinction from the conventional world.

Real or Not?

In mandala practice, even if we let go of a prized possession like a red convertible, we get it back in time to drive to work. If we give away our very own body, we get it back in time for breakfast. So you might think, "This is just playacting. How can this be effective? It's not real. I am just pretending." If you experience yourself as pretending, the practice will not be effective, of course. If you practice with the understanding that form is emptiness and emptiness is form, then you will have no problem. Are you just pretending to be a human being? What is required here is not to "really" give away things, but to really discover the emptiness of all phenomena through the mind of letting go, and to create a more fluid, less substantial way of seeing ourselves and the world around us.

The degree of sincerity that we bring to the practice is what makes it effective or not. The object of our giving becomes the tool for examining and transforming the mind. We investigate our attachment. We experience the suffering caused by attachment through steadying the mind and applying investigative insight. Whether or not we actually give away the red convertible, we still use it to identify our neurotic identification with this chunk of metal. We look at what we expect from this car, how we rely on this machine to communicate status, power, wealth, attractiveness, and confidence. Imagination becomes the tool by which we look at how we lack confidence, how we do not trust in our capabilities. With shamata, all of this becomes a felt, embodied experience, which allows for a shift to occur.

The Three-Part Practice of Letting Go: Outer, Inner, and Secret

Mandala practice is divided into outer, inner, and secret offerings. Outer refers to giving away extraordinary attributes of an imaginary universe, such as Mount Meru with its jewels and precious riches. Outer also refers to attributes of the world that we share with all sentient beings, such as the earth that we stand on. We share a common perception of

pine forests and the Milky Way, red tulips and mountain streams. The inner offerings are closest and most personal to us, such as our family and our friends, our wealth and our health, and so forth. The secret offering occurs with the perception that the giver, the offering, and the object of the offering all manifest emptiness. The grossest, most obvious forms of ego-clinging and grasping can be eliminated through the outer and inner offerings. But to eliminate the subtlest, most difficult to recognize forms of ego-clinging, we need the secret mandala practice.

The outer, inner, and secret offerings are not three separate, sequential practices, but rather three aspects of the same practice that can be brought into play throughout the practice session. The three categories are simply aids to understanding and do not reflect an inherent distinction. For all three, we hold the offering mandala, recite the mantra, and sit before the mandala of accomplishment.

Imagination

Before going into the details of the outer, inner, and secret offerings, I want to speak about imagination again, because with this practice the imagery definitely becomes quite complex, even for the least elaborate versions.

Generally speaking, we harness the power of imagination in order to purify and transform our conventional perceptions of reality. For example, we have an idea of what a mountain looks like. Mount Meru does not match that idea. In this limited example of a mismatch, an opportunity arises to develop flexibility. Once we place this mismatch within the context of Buddhist teachings, we appreciate the skillful means at play. The reality challenged is the one in which form—tables, mountains, cars, children, everything including our "self"—is perceived as solid, permanent, immutable, and independent. What's missing is an understanding of emptiness. The forms within the mandala palace manifest emptiness. The forms outside the mandala palace manifest emptiness. However, most of us are deeply entrenched in habits of perception that exclude the emptiness aspect from the form-emptiness

equation. For this reason, we need to be shaken out of our conditioned patterns. To do this, we use the imagined mandala. We crawl into our mind-made spaceship and go to another realm.

The point is that the forms inside the mandala are not more or less empty than anything else. But we have deliberately used the power of our own imagination to create this universe. And the more we become familiar with this process, the easier we can see that we create the forms outside the mandala just as we create the forms inside. All forms are empty in essence. Bringing awareness to mandala practice really helps us recognize that we create our own reality. With this understanding, we make a huge shift away from confusion and toward clarity.

It's important to approach the complexities of this visualization with a relaxed mind. The details may be overwhelming at first. We are working with the entire refuge assembly, a projection of the entire cosmos and everything in it, and our own list of personal objects as offerings. And we are counting mantras and putting piles of rice on a plate! Remember it is always more important to invoke the presence of the enlightened beings we make the offerings to, than to conjure up every detail of the traditional imagery.

Imagination practice supports shamata—calm-abiding meditation. Using an object as a support for our meditation settles the agitation of monkey-mind by bringing awareness to the support itself. In the particular case of the mandala offering, we may initially feel that too many separate elements make finding a focal point of awareness impossible, or we might become dizzy from trying with a clenched mind to hold the entire magical sphere in place, or we might feel like we are jumping from detail to detail, like a monkey swinging from branch to branch. Most likely, all the separate elements will not be so clear, especially in the beginning.

The point is: don't be discouraged. It's more important to develop a basic sense of what is taking place, to feel that the mandala universe that we offer is the very best, the most beautiful, and the most pleasurable offering we can make. That pure intention is sufficient for the practice to be completely effective. Don't worry if the details are not perfectly clear.

The Outer Offerings

In mandala liturgy, the outer offering includes the four continents surrounding Mount Meru, the sun and the moon, and the pristine ocean bounded by a ring of iron mountains. It also includes all the riches and jewels, animals and flowers, BMWs and five-star hotels, and so forth that we have placed in our offering mandala universe, as well as a trillion light universes if we choose to add them. Depending on the ngondro text we are using, these descriptions may be quite elaborate, but generally the outer offering reflects our sense of the whole world-system and its most magnificent attributes.

As we accumulate the repetitions while making the symbolic offering with rice, we imagine specific aspects of the universe that may especially delight the deities: "I offer forests of sweet-smelling pine, coral reefs, tropical islands, and snow-peaked mountains." We can offer what we imagine or identify as the most magnificent, beautiful, and pleasing aspects of the entire cosmos, which might be environmental wonders, elaborate feasts, magnificent palaces, or pleasing aromas. As I said before, we also offer shared perceptions: if we are driving in a car, we can offer the trees that we pass or the sky above us; or we can offer our pleasure at watching children play, or seeing art, or listening to music.

An American friend told me that many years ago in California, she was hosting a lama who had recently come from Tibet. One afternoon they were out driving and the woman needed groceries, so she pulled into one of those supermarkets that are about the size of a football field. I can tell you from personal experience that if you are unfamiliar with a supersized market, it evokes complete disbelief. The lama stared at rows upon rows of food, maybe eighty-two kinds of breakfast cereal, freezers hundreds of feet long, forty kinds of canned juice in four different sizes, ten brands of toilet paper, fifty flavors of ice cream—things like that. She described how he ran his hands over these objects and lifted them off the shelves like a blind man trying to see through touching.

However, his total, jaw-dropping amazement did not hit fully until

they reached the fruit department. The glorious pyramids of oranges, grapefruits, cantaloupes, bananas, apples, kiwis, pineapples, and many more varieties were one thousand times more luxurious than anything he had ever seen, even on the most elaborate shrines of the highest lamas in Tibet and even for the most auspicious ceremonies. This truly was the unimaginable, inconceivable universe of the buddhas manifesting before his eyes.

Apparently, soon after the lama's initial surprise, he began doing prayers. My friend did not understand Tibetan, but she recognized the mudra—hand gesture—of offering as he rotated his hands and then opened his arms from the elbows with his palms up, which looks like offering everything to the wind. This is the mind of letting go, the mind that is struck dumb by an extraordinarily beautiful magic display, a surplus of goodness and riches. It is with this mind that the lama made the offering of what he had just encountered. Not only did he not physically feast on the food, he did not allow himself to feast on the vision. His response to this spontaneously arisen mandala was to offer it, to give it away for the benefit of others, so that all beings might know such abundance and that the nourishment of these offerings be the cause of their enlightenment. This is what we mean by the mind of letting go. Quite different than ordinary generosity, don't you think?

The Benefit of Imaginary Offerings

Helping others through compassionate, protective, or generous activities, even if these activities are tinged with grasping, definitely contains seeds of goodness and counters negative karma. Therefore the question that naturally arises is: How can sitting down in front of a shrine and offering imaginary universes actually be a more effective way of accumulating merit than doing good deeds in the conventional world?

Normally our good deeds in the world are compromised. We may be acting from our ideas and concepts of what "good deed" means. Our good deeds may be a way of showing off to others so that despite appearances, these activities reinforce attachment to self and to pride. Even if we have a positive motivation, when we act generously in an

ordinary way we often do so with a clear sense of there being an "I" who is giving something to someone else, which locks us into habitual selfishness and constricts our limitless potential.

This is the opposite of what we do with mandala offerings. The use of imagination frees us from habitual stinginess. We have no one to show off to. Without friends or family to witness our good deeds, we can experience a vast new realm of pure generosity uncompromised by pride and personal gain. The generosity generated through the offering of the mandala is free from the hope of receiving anything in return.

Once we develop some sense of the outer mandala offering and of what letting go means and what it feels like, then we can proceed to the more difficult practice of the inner mandala offering.

The Inner Offerings

With the inner offering, the recitation and offering activity stay the same as the outer offering, but the content becomes most personal. Here we concentrate on four categories of things to which we are most attached: our wealth, our body, our friends and family (traditionally our "retinue"), and our virtue. All objects, people, emotions, or situations that we most identify with, are most attached to, that we grasp after with the most tenacious ego-fixation, fall within these four categories and are the main objects of ego-clinging. The four categories do not have to be practiced in any particular order.

The more intimate we make these offerings, the more effective the practice will be. Wealth may include jewels, houses, cars, stocks, and companies. But wealth also includes objects that enrich our life in a personal way, such as wedding rings, family photographs, or a beloved person or pet. We identify objects that truly mean something, because in addition to the objects themselves, we're experimenting with letting go of ownership.

What happens in your body when you try this? In your jaw? Your shoulders? Your hands? Do you feel a tightening? A resistance? Do you want to reach out and take the objects back? See if you can connect with the elastic sensation of attachment, that rubber-band quality, when

the band that ties you to the object stretches thinner and thinner but doesn't quite break.

Offering the Kleshas

Because we talk so much about riches and abundance for this practice, we often overlook that, most importantly, we want to work with the quality of attachment. The kleshas—mental afflictions—are rich material for this. We can offer our anger, greed, or panic. When I was in three-year retreat we studied a classic text that says: "The outer world is the offering container, like a bowl filled with fruit or jewels. The bowl represents the universe, and the fruits or jewels represent all sentient beings. The offering container holds everything, and even our kleshas are appropriate offerings."

At that time, I thought it sounded insulting to offer anger, jealousy, and pride to the buddhas, like giving your best friend a pile of dirt for a birthday present. When I asked Saljay Rinpoche how offering the kleshas could be of benefit, he told me, "For the Buddha, there is no difference between gold and shit. We make offerings to cultivate the mind of letting go. The only worthwhile offering is letting go itself. The practice is most effective when we work with the fixations of aversion and attachment. We offer anger to let go of anger; we offer pride to let go of pride. The blessings do not come from conventional values, but from the quality of letting go."

Saljay Rinpoche peered at me intently. He could see that I was pondering this surprising equality between shit and gold. In a gentle voice he added, "The Buddha has everything. Everything. He doesn't need anything from us. Our offerings do not enrich him or add anything to him. That would be impossible. We cannot add anything to the Buddha. We are not trying to please the Buddha. Making offerings is all about letting go."

I have a student whose initial enthusiasm for ngondro was defeated by sleepiness. She tried various strategies for energizing her practice, until finally she had to accept an obvious pattern: on the same days that she could not stay awake to practice, she could arrive at a party wide awake and full of energy; or she would go to the theater, and not even

the darkness would make her eyes close. She became discouraged and blamed herself for resisting practice. It seems that she had the idea that all practice at every level should be approached joyfully and enthusiastically. But of course, if we were always like that, we would have no motivation to practice. When she came to see me she asked, "Why, why, why? Why is practice so hard, why do I have more enthusiasm for silly activities than for following the dharma?"

There is no secret explanation. We are in samsara. That's all. Samsara is one bad habit following another—bad in the sense that we have become attached to habits that do not lead us away from suffering. Samsara is difficult. But our life is not just a choice between extremes: nirvana is good; samsara is bad. We are in samsara now, and we are looking for goodness in samsara. That is why we are doing ngondro, and the benefits of this practice come from our sincerity.

So we don't just offer jewels and fruits and everything that is beautiful and wondrous. I told this student, "Offer your resistance, offer your sleepiness and confusion. Offer your fondness for parties and movies. If you label this 'ignorance,' no problem—offer your ignorance." If we recognize our kleshas, what better offering could we make?

Offering Our Body

The second category of the inner mandala offering is our body. When asked to give up something, we may think of our possessions first. But most of us reserve our deepest attachment for our own body. Here we want to be specific so as to really feel the letting go of our body parts: hands, legs, limbs, organs, brain, eyes, ears, and so on. Again, see if you can connect to the feeling of letting go and to any resistance that may arise. Work with the sense of ownership as much as with the objects themselves. Letting go of the body is a really powerful antidote to self-clinging and to all those ideas and fixations that create the most suffering through self-preoccupation.

Offering Family and Friends

For the third part of the inner offering, we offer our family and friends. We let go of our attachment to everyone around us to whom we feel

personally connected. Think of individuals that we classify as "mine" as in: my spouse, my father, my mother, my child, my teacher, my dog. Or think of someone who is dying or has recently died, and then use that situation to confront the challenge of letting go.

One student told me that for this practice, she thought about what living being she loved most in the world: her black dog named Dante. She developed a fantasy about giving the dog to me. Of course she knows perfectly well that I cannot have a dog; I am always traveling and staying at monasteries. No problem. She offered to take care of the dog for me, feed the dog, walk the dog, and be the dog's best friend. She explained, "I could only practice giving the dog away because I knew that I would still have him."

"That's OK. It's a start," I told her. Then to tease her, in a serious voice I said, "Someday I will come and ask you for my dog," and she looked completely horrified.

I also explained that her fantasy really was a start in the right direction. It has genuine value. Just to consider giving away what you most love is a big deal. Don't forget that.

Offering Our Virtue

For the fourth aspect of the inner offering, we let go of our virtue. Virtue means everything of a positive nature that we have accomplished, including our positive actions, our merit, our meditations or any spiritual practice. Any and all inner qualities of a positive nature that we feel pertain to us, we offer as our virtue: our generosity, kindness, compassion, diligence, perseverance, loyalty, courage, bravery—whatever aspects of our character that we identity as positive.

Many students report they cannot relate to their virtue. This seems to be based on an assumption that any identification of virtue will automatically display pride and self-cherishing. This is a kind of reverse ego, because it makes a really big deal out of our virtue. It suggests an ownership of this virtue or a complete identification with it. Virtue is simply the positive things we have done or are doing. Everyone has some degree of virtue. But if we get uptight about identifying it, we are making it into something special, like, "Wow, look at me, I am so

kind and patient and wonderful." We start preening like a peacock and embarrassing ourselves at the same time. This is just tricky ego manifesting, not virtue. We must try to separate them.

The Secret Offerings

In previous ngondro steps, I suggested emptiness as one of several meditation styles that could invigorate our mind when tiredness and boredom challenge our aspirations. But with mandala, emptiness meditation is integral to the practice. Emptiness is the secret offering—secret in the sense of profound. Emptiness meditation is no longer an optional bonus, but essential to realizing the benefits of mandala. For the cultivation of the pure perception of reality—which rests with emptiness—we speak of the accumulation of wisdom, because it is wisdom that recognizes emptiness.

With the secret mandala offerings, the activity does not change. We continue to recite the mandala mantra and place seven heaps of rice on top of the offering-mandala plate again and again, and we continue to count, but we drop the visualization of the mandala universe offerings. Once we stabilize our body and mind, we begin to ask: "Who is making this offering?" Our body manifests an impermanent form, yet that is the clarity aspect of emptiness. We hold an offering plate, which is also the clarity aspect of emptiness. Rice too is a form of emptiness; our shrine, our fruits and candies, our incense and flowers, everything is emptiness. We pray to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, who are also forms of emptiness. "Emptiness is form, form is emptiness; form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form."

You can think of all the offerings that you previously made for the outer and inner practices as you recite the mantra and make the seven heaps on the offering mandala: "The emptiness of this form, this being, this pet, this bank account, this body, this palace, these diamonds and rubies, these horses and elephants, these limbs, this friend, these kleshas and virtues—I offer all this to the emptiness of the buddhas and the deities."

Continue to recite and make the rice offerings, and rest in the empty nondualistic nature of all phenomena; or if you understand how to do

nature-of-mind practice, you can just rest in pure awareness. Stop all the visualizations and the questioning, and just maintain the recitations, the placing of the seven heaps, and the counting.

Both emptiness meditation and nature-of-mind meditation are absolute forms of mandala practice and have the greatest benefit. How does this work? As we said before, wisdom recognizes emptiness. Clearly perceiving the empty nature of all phenomena arises from wisdom, stabilizes wisdom, and accumulates more wisdom. This is the ultimate benefit, because everything that we do is oriented toward the ultimate end of suffering for ourselves and others. We accomplish this by recognizing and nurturing a true and complete view of reality. By maintaining the perception of emptiness, we are nurturing and accumulating wisdom.

The secret offering moves us closer to the next and final practice of ngondro. The accumulation of merit and wisdom are basic aspects of the Mahayana school and necessary for the continuation of our path. They condition our mind for the road ahead, and the completion of this practice leaves us on the verge of entering the pure perception of the vajra world. With the next ngondro step, guru yoga, we truly begin Vajrayana dharma. With the secret offering, we accumulate wisdom; in guru yoga, we practice from a place of wisdom. But we approach that with the secret offering.

Gathering of the Two Accumulations

Having completed the three offerings, we aspire that all beings perfect the two accumulations. This is called gathering the two accumulations. The outer and inner offerings comprise the accumulation of merit. The accumulation of wisdom is accomplished through the secret offering. In addition to offering the universe and everything in it, virtue and merit come from the dedication to all beings. With this practice, there is both an offering and a giving. First we develop virtue and merit, then we give it to all beings. In this way, giving is receiving. We give and accumulate merit and wisdom. We practice with the aspiration that all beings be filled with the two accumulations.

Alternating Meditation Techniques

It takes some practice to hold in the mind's eye the entire field of the deities in the mandala palace, Mount Meru, and the billion trillion universes of light, and so on. But we can also use alternate methods.

When you first begin a mandala practice session, try to cultivate a feeling for the whole immense project. Without getting entangled in details, imagine the mandala palace; bring forth the presence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas; experience the vastness, bounty, and translucent rainbow light of this palace. Imagine Mount Meru and all the conventional and personal offerings that communicate immense pleasure, luxury, and unfathomable generosity. Start off this way, and contemplate the overall meaning. Allow your mind to move gently from one aspect of the imagined field to another, and then slowly reconfigure the different aspects so that you have some sense of the infinite totality. It is important to approach this mental construction with a relaxed mind, otherwise it can be an exhausting and discouraging exercise. But if or when you become really restless or bored, you can change to another method.

Shamata with Object

To bring stability to your mind, use the field of imagination, or a specific aspect within it, as support. This could be Vajradhara, or another deity, or a horse or an elephant, or the jewels of Mount Meru. Or you can drop the images altogether and use the hand motion of placing the rice on the mandala plate as your support, or the sound of the recitation can be used for support.

Shamata without Object

While resting in open awareness, maintain the recitation and continue to count. With mandala practice, as with previous practices, cultivation of shamata is not the main goal but it is nonetheless a side benefit.

Loving-Kindness, Compassion, and Bodhichitta

Here you drop the imagination, but maintain the recitation while placing the heaps and continuing to count. Bring your awareness to your aspiration to help all sentient beings become enlightened. You can think, "May I accumulate merit and wisdom so that I may help others attain enlightenment, and may all beings accumulate merit and wisdom so that they may help others become enlightened." The emphasis stays with the ultimate aspiration for the ultimate happiness.

Merit is an extra benefit of maintaining bodhichitta. Like shamata, accumulating merit is not the main intention of mandala offering, but automatically comes with arousing bodhichitta. As I said before, the aspiration to help all sentient beings experience the end of suffering accumulates merit. The motivation and intention itself conditions the mind in ways that increase our capacities and capabilities to help sentient beings and set us off in the right direction. This means we head toward virtuous activity and away from behavior that causes confusion and mental or physical harm, both to ourselves and others. Our merit increases by making countless offerings with our aspiration of bodhichitta.

Emptiness

We can also choose to work with emptiness, either through vipashyana practice or nature-of-mind practice. In addition to the secret offering, we can bring an understanding of the empty nature of the outer and inner offerings as well. We have used our imagination to bring forth an enormously complex field of universes within universes. With insight, we can examine the union of form and emptiness in all phenomena while maintaining the recitations, placing the heaps, and continuing to count. And we can ask: "Who is accumulating merit and wisdom? I am emptiness, my actions are emptiness, and the objects of my supplications are emptiness." By making this inquiry and then resting into nonconceptual mind, the practice of offering becomes an absolute offering practice. In order to fulfill our commitment to help all beings

become enlightened, we need to nurture the wisdom that recognizes emptiness.

If you have received nature-of-mind teachings, then you can maintain the recitations and rice offerings while allowing the mind to rest in pure awareness.

You can alternate these meditation styles as often as you like. You do not have to do them in any particular order, and you can practice one more than another. It may happen that the meditation styles may change spontaneously of their own accord. There is no need to block this change or to revert back to what you were doing. As my teachers stressed: the point is to use these alternatives to keep the practice alive and vibrant, and not just stay on autopilot.

Ending the Practice Session

To end the practice session, we allow all the buddhas and bodhisattvas that we imagined during the mandala practice to dissolve into Buddha Vajradhara. The palace itself dissolves into Vajradhara, who then dissolves into light, and this light dissolves into us and into all sentient beings. Because everything has dissolved into Vajradhara, we become one with all the buddhas and bodhisattvas; with Shakyamuni Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha; the root of blessings, which is the guru; the root of accomplishment, which is the yidams; and the root of activity, which is the dharma protectors. Then allow your mind to rest. If you recognize the nature of mind, then rest your mind into pure awareness, or just rest in open awareness.

Dedicating the Merit

After this, we dedicate any merit and wisdom that we may have attained to the liberation of all sentient beings. People with whom we have a karmic connection can be directly helped by this. Most of us, and most of the people that we know, are beset by chronic dissatisfaction. Mandala practice helps us open up and connect with all beings. Giving ultimately

includes offering habitual patterns of grasping, the roots of which keep us isolated and fearful in the world and perpetuate dissatisfaction. We wish for all beings to experience this possibility of letting go.

Cleaning Up

Inevitably some rice ends up on the floor. At the end of the session, make sure to clean the area thoroughly. Do not mix rice swept from the floor with the leftover rice on the shrine. Whatever you discard, do not just throw it in the garbage. Continue to use it as an offering, perhaps by placing it outside for insects or birds.

Signs of Accomplishment

The most obvious effects of mandala practice relate to how we now approach acts of generosity. If we can bring this into alignment with the mind of letting go, it will definitely loosen the tight grip of grasping. In the broader view, using imagination to construct the mandala universe confronts the limitations of our fixed and limited perception. We cannot stabilize the pure perception of the unity of form and emptiness all at once, but this practice introduces a more expansive view. This too undermines ego-fixation, for it is the grasping mind that holds these preconceptions and fabrications in place.

At the beginning of ngondro, we use imagination to dissolve the habitual boundaries of who we think we are or can be, and to explore the impermanence of tables, other people, and perhaps ourselves. In this way, we challenge our assumptions that these entities exist in solid and individuated ways. Questioning the reality of appearances also helps dissolve our clinging and fixation. With the unique ngondro, the objects of imagination—buddhas, deities, yidams, all sentient beings, entire sacred universes—become quite complex. Yet we ourselves remain within our own physical form. With our ordinary body, we prostrate to the three jewels; with our ordinary speech, we supplicate an imagined Vajrasattva, purifying karma and obscurations. Through the practice of

mandala offerings, we purify grasping with the mind of letting go, thus completing the two accumulations of merit and wisdom.

The deities, buddhas, yidams, palaces, and universes that we imagined still existed over there while we sat over here. Only at the very end of each practice did we completely merge with all the objects of our imagination and recognize our inherent inseparability from them.

With these first three unique foundation practices behind us, we arrive at guru yoga committed, purified, and enriched, and ready to take a big step forward: to use imagination to recognize that we are, and have always been, buddhas, and to practice from a place of wisdom. We no longer remain separate from the deities, practicing from a dualistic sense of "me" and "them." For the first time, we use imagination to inhabit a deity, to be an enlightened being, moving us ever closer to experiencing the truth of who we actually are.

11. The Fourth Unique Practice

GURU YOGA

Visitors from all over the world regarded my father as an enlightened master, and I cannot remember a time when discussions about the supreme importance of the guru were not part of my life. Yet when I was little, my father was already old. He was sick with diabetes and wore thick glasses. I felt great love for my father and devotion to him as a teacher, but to me, the living guru appeared a little shabby, and to regard him as a living buddha made me uncomfortable.

I entered three-year retreat at Sherab Ling still not convinced that a guru was necessary, and soon I began making my case with Saljay Rinpoche. After all, I reasoned, "How could we need more than the Buddha, Sangha, and Dharma?"

His answer came one afternoon when we were warming ourselves in the winter sun and talking casually. Saljay Rinpoche never created anticipation. He was reminiscing about being a young monk, telling me about his own three-year retreat in Tibet with about thirty other monks, and about their elderly retreat master, La Gen (which means "old monk") Namdak, a highly revered lama. It seems that Namdak had stopped shaving his head, and long, wispy hairs grew straight out from above his ears, plus he had a hacking cough.

When La Gen Namdak taught this last stage of ngondro to Saljay Rinpoche and the other retreatants, he dragged himself down from his retreat hut to the dharma hall. Coughing the entire time, he explained that for guru yoga, one visualizes Guru Vajradhara or Buddha Vajradhara above one's head, and he emphasized that the deity was one

and the same as the living guru, and that the living guru could also be visualized.

After the teachings, one of the monks said to a fellow student (who many years later became my teacher Saljay Rinpoche), "I cannot visualize this old man on top of my head. He's so ugly and coughs all the time, and his hair is funny looking. What should I do?" Saljay Rinpoche didn't know what to say.

A few days later, Namdak appeared in the hall to give teachings. Saljay Rinpoche whispered to his fellow monk, "Tell him your problem. Say something."

So the monk told Namdak, "I am having a hard time practicing guru yoga because I do not want to imagine an ugly old guy like you on top of my head."

Namdak replied, "I did not say you have to imagine me [*cough, cough*]. You can visualize Vajradhara."

Then I asked Saljay Rinpoche, "If the guru is not the physical form, who is he?"

"The essence of the guru is the guru," he explained. "The physical form of the guru is just perception. When seen through ordinary perception, I am not enlightened. You cannot receive any blessings from this ordinary form. The real teacher is the wisdom essence of this body, speech, and mind."

I continued my questions until Saljay Rinpoche echoed my father: "The buddhas and bodhisattvas are like the lamps that have already been lit. To get lit, you need to make the connection, to touch wick to wick, mind to mind. The mind of devotion touches the mind of enlightenment through the guru."

Saljay Rinpoche's story wasn't just a general or random teaching, but touched on something that caused me a lot of embarrassment: Saljay Rinpoche was old, with false teeth; he limped and walked with a cane and, like my father, wore glasses. From the moment he had been introduced as my master, I had been thinking, "Why is this old guy my teacher? He cannot even walk."

Up until then I was like Saljay Rinpoche's friend at Palpung Monastery, disturbed by having this old guy as my guru. But after this exchange, I

Saljay Rinpoche at Sherab Ling circa 1988.

dropped my resistance and returned continuously to Saljay Rinpoche's words: "The essence of the guru is the guru."

In our Karma Kagyu tradition, for guru yoga practice we become the deity Vajrayogini and supplicate Buddha Vajradhara, who is above our head or in front of us. Other lineages may use different deities, but the practice remains similar. Guru yoga combines refuge, bodhichitta, confession and offerings, the paramitas, and the accumulation of merit and wisdom—a full, complete practice that incorporates the previous steps. But with one big difference: now we practice from within the body, speech, and mind of Vajrayogini. We function from those enlightened qualities that we have uncovered and experience ourselves as an enlightened being. We may not be able to sustain this experience past our practice session, but we become familiar with it, and with this experience we enter the Vajrayana.

Absolute and Relative Perception

In everyday life, we generally experience ourselves as separate from others. Therefore we do not start dharma practice by becoming one with a buddha; instead we work within the familiar limits of dualistic mind and say, "I am here, and Buddha Shakyamuni is over there." With guru yoga, we work to dissolve dualistic perception. We see everyone as a buddha, including ourselves. We extend this view to other sentient beings through the guru. Instead of seeing Vajradhara or Vajrasattva as embodying the guru as we did previously, we also see that the guru embodies the buddhas. Objects stay the same; perception shifts. "The essence of the guru is the guru." The outside form is human; the inside essence is buddha, as it always is from the absolute view. This is true for all of us. We don't limit this perception to the guru; we apply it to all sentient beings. Yet the connection between the guru and ourselves, and the guru and the buddhas, inspires this perception and makes it easier to access.

Earlier our ordinary form was inspired by a buddha form. Here our buddha form allows us to see the human form of the guru as a buddha. Before, our human form developed devotion to the buddha forms. Now, our buddha form responds with compassion to the human form. Even though we speak of devotion to enlightened beings and of compassion for sentient beings, eventually these two qualities become one. Once we recognize our teacher as a buddha, it becomes easier to see ourselves and all sentient beings as a buddha. This describes taking fruition as path.

The actual practice session includes the practitioner sitting in meditation posture embodying Vajrayogini's wisdom body and making full prostrations. At this point, who does prostrations? Who confesses, purifies, and accumulates? Our ordinary body does, but as emanations of Vajrayogini. We remain seated, while from our Vajrayogini heart center come thousands of manifestations of our own ordinary form. We have switched gears: before, the buddhas were emanations of our ordinary form; now, our ordinary form is an emanation of the buddhas. We see our ordinary body and hear our ordinary voice supplicating the buddhas, but through the eyes and ears of Vajrayogini. Our ordinary form

is no longer "relative" reality, but "merely" relative, which means that we no longer participate in the fabrication of permanence, solidity, and independence. From the wisdom mind of Vajrayogini, we see our own emanations as impermanent, insubstantial, and interdependent.

At this stage, we're halfway across a bridge between ordinary, dualistic perception and pure perception—the essential, nondivisible union of samsara and nirvana. Becoming a deity such as Vajrayogini definitely puts us on the bridge. But actually we cannot make it all the way across by ourselves. The guru helps us cross from relative to absolute reality. The guru is both the guide and the bridge itself. What moves us from confusion to clarity is how we perceive the guru, and the transformation that this creates in how we see ourselves.

The guru is both the most important and the most misunderstood aspect of Vajrayana. People new to Vajrayana sometimes think that the role of the guru promotes a kind of theocracy, in which the innocent student is enslaved to an oppressive lord. This misses the essential point: that the student too is a buddha, and all our practices, principles, and strategies encourage this understanding. All sentient beings are buddhas. Seeing someone else as a buddha helps us to see ourselves as a buddha. It gives breath, blood, and bones to a concept that might otherwise remain removed, abstract, and idealized.

Identifying heroes, mentors, or coaches in ordinary life works with the same principal that makes the guru so beneficial. Say that we are a high school skier. One day an Olympic champion that we admire watches us ski and tells us, "You too can be great." This leads us to another parallel point: the commitment to succeed does not just come from the student, but also from the guides and gurus. Their commitment is equally strong, if not stronger, to see students discover their own buddhahood. A good coach or mentor believes in the student and recognizes the student's potential and best qualities. Their recognition helps the student recognize themselves. The coach introduces the student to the best of themselves, just as a guru does. The content differs, but the strategies remain similar.

Vajrayana strategies are not designed to benefit enlightened beings; enlightened beings don't need them. Enlightened beings also do not

need our devotion, offerings, and supplications. We need them. This understanding is especially important for Westerners. We use these systems and strategies, with their rituals, gurus, and buddhas, because they illuminate the path to our own awakening.

The Three Important Points of Guru Yoga

In guru yoga practice, we use imagination to arrive at the pure perception of a flesh-and-blood teacher. How this works becomes clear through three important aspects: taking fruition as path, devotion and faith, and the karmic connection.

The First Point: Taking Fruition as Path

With this practice, we no longer project the inner life of a buddha onto external forms, but turn those projections inward to illuminate our own buddha qualities. With guru yoga, our own body, speech, and mind are transformed into a buddha's body, speech, and mind. This is what we mean by "imagination becomes path." In previous practices, we imagined the deities that we aspired to be; in this way, we shortened the distance between "us" and "them." Now we eliminate the separation altogether.

Before guru yoga, we approached wisdom through our practices by recognizing our true nature as wisdom, by recognizing the truth of impermanence as wisdom, by recognizing the truth of emptiness as wisdom, by recognizing the interdependence of all phenomena as wisdom, and by recognizing that suffering itself can be transformed into wisdom. All these views identify approaches to wisdom. With guru yoga, we eliminate methods and means and embody wisdom. We enter the Vajrayana and become the enlightened being of Vajrayogini, mother of all the buddhas, source of all wisdom.

We have been using awareness and imagination as method. In taking refuge, Vajrasattva, and mandala, we practiced with relative and absolute aspects, using our own form but then asking, "Who's doing this practice?" We used this question to explore form and emptiness.

We spoke of buddha nature existing inside and outside our form, and then recognized our essential inseparability from the buddhas. But in guru yoga, we function from the place of having our potential fulfilled. Until this point, we have taken seed as path, cause as path, and means as path. Now we take fruition as path.

Of course, we are still on the path. Until we attain full enlightenment, we will be limited by concepts to some degree. Some hint of samsara will shadow us, some dissatisfaction will disturb our mind. But when potential and fruition merge, the wind at our back grows stronger, and our efforts become more effective.

Believing in Being a Buddha

Many people practice for decades without really believing in their capacity for liberation. Truthfully, it's very difficult to believe in our own buddhahood 100 percent. Whenever I expressed these doubts to my father, he would say, "That's normal. Just try. And keep practicing. The most important thing is to keep practicing."

Imagining ourselves as Vajrayogini might feel like dressing for Halloween. We need to see if our costume fits right, to see how it feels. In a nonthreatening way, it provides an opportunity to let go of the habits that confine us to the narrow box labeled: "This is who I am." However, with imagination practice, the effort is still all on our side, and actually we cannot fully realize our potential by ourselves. Where does real help come from in our efforts to stabilize pure perception? Not from the deities, not from the buddhas, and not from the lineage holders who have been dead for hundreds of years. Direct, invaluable help comes from the living guide.

Milarepa's Admonition

Once Milarepa recalled that after living in mountain caves with nothing to eat but nettles, a student told him, "No ordinary person could live like you, with only rags on your back in winter and only nettles for food. Therefore you must be an emanation of the Buddha."

Milarepa replied, "That is the wrong view. If you practice dharma, you will become a buddha, you will become enlightened. We all have the

same potential. If you think that I am just an emanation of the Buddha, you will never recognize your own buddhahood."

To perceive Milarepa as an emanation of the Buddha expresses monkey-mind conceptualizations. When our relationship with the guru is accompanied by genuine devotion, the monkey-mind stops juggling so many different ideas and concepts about the guru and about who this person really is—positive and negative. The person who described Milarepa as an emanation probably meant it as a compliment, like, "Wow, you rock. You must be an emanation." Yet the student's perception did not allow for true liberation.

Many students assume that not seeing a halo around their guru's head means that they have failed the test of devotion, which just suggests more concepts. "Wrong" is a concept. "Halo" is a concept. "Emanation" is a concept. But as I have said before, we use concepts to go beyond concepts, and that includes talking about pure perception. Of course it's a paradox, because any concept about pure perception muddles its meaning.

The Buddha as Doctor

Shakyamuni Buddha compared the student to a patient, the teacher to a doctor, and the dharma to medicine. We entrust body problems to an experienced physician, and mind problems to a guru-doctor. The Buddha who died more than two thousand six hundred years ago continues to illuminate our path, but he cannot be as kind and compassionate as a living teacher. He cannot hold up a mirror to our neurotic habits or reveal those secret places where the ego scurries to hide, like a crab scuttling for the rocks. If we commit to eliminating the mental afflictions and neuroses that arise from the ignorant repetitions of body, speech, and mind behaviors, then generally we need stronger medicine than ancient words in sacred texts. We need a living, well-trained, educated physician who can make the best diagnoses and prescribe the most effective remedies, which can take as many forms as there are patients with illnesses.

Tibetan history is filled with stories of great masters doing all sorts

of things in an effort to guide their students to awakening. Some stories sound so magical that modern people relate to them more as folktales than instructive lessons. But plenty of contemporary stories also show that remedies for our neuroses may come in unexpected forms.

A few years ago, to celebrate his birthday, a disciple took his teacher to a fancy restaurant in Kathmandu. The teacher offered to order, and the disciple thought, "Great! Since we are both vegetarians, this will be perfect." This student did not simply refrain from eating meat: he lectured other students about it, displaying pride about his moral superiority and disrespecting Buddhists who ate meat.

When the waiter came, the teacher ordered chicken masala and lamb curry. The student began fidgeting with his napkin and gulping down glasses of water. When the dishes arrived, the teacher took a big spoonful and said, "Oh my, this is very delicious. It has been a long time since I had a lamb curry, and I am really going to enjoy this."

The student did not respond. Then the teacher asked, "How is it?"

The disciple muttered, "Fine." But he was glowering, feeling hurt and confused.

The teacher happily continued his meal until finally he said, "Happy birthday. I hope you are enjoying my gift." With that, they both burst out laughing.

Shakyamuni Buddha prescribed various rules and regulations for his followers in response to conflicts and circumstances that arose within his community. Compiled in a set of teachings called the vinaya, these include codes for ethical behavior, sexual regulations, personal hygiene, eating habits, and so forth. But not every possible circumstance arose. The vinaya does not offer remedies for vegetarian pride. That's where a living guide can help.

In order for the patient to swallow the medicine, that person must trust the doctor. The vegetarian disciple could receive the lesson, because he trusted that his teacher wasn't simply intent on ruining his birthday but on ruining his attachment and pride. And the teacher must know a student's capacity. If the student just remains hurt and angry and doesn't get the lesson, there has been no teaching.

Understanding Prayer

Because we aspire to realize enlightenment in one lifetime, we use a variety of powerful tools to help uproot our deeply embedded ignorance: visuals, smells, imagination, mantra, objects, prayer, and so forth. If we dismiss the importance of these tools as mere dharma props, we risk allowing our arrogance and pride to defeat us. We all need support on this path: you, me, everyone.

Aspiration can be a form of prayer: we devoutly aspire to follow the Buddha's path, be compassionate to all sentient beings, be less selfish, act more generous, and so forth. Here aspiration is like something coiled that we want to unwind, or like a little shoot that wishes to mature into a full-grown grain. The feeling is to bring forth something from within, not to ask for something from without.

Another understanding of prayer relies on appealing for help from those who appear outside ourselves, and on asking for things that appear outside of ourselves. We project external beings from our imagination; we create dualities between "me" and "the guru," or "me" and "the Buddha," or "the guru" and "the Buddha." Then we use this relative reality as skillful means so that "I" am praying to "the guru" or "the Buddha." We may ask for help in removing negativities and obscurations. Because we have problem-making habits, dualities and prayers are very useful.

From an absolute view, these beings are not outside of ourselves. We bring them forth through our imagination. In this way, praying circulates within our mind like cotton circulates around a spinning wheel: the material that we spool onto the spinning wheel is the same material that comes off the spinning wheel, but the process creates a different texture, quality, and capability. Praying never leaves our mind, but the wish is transformed by circulating through the mind's imagination of the buddhas. This increases the capacity for making this wish or prayer come true.

The blessings of the buddhas are the gift of confidence. If our own sense of confidence and capability increases, the effects will surely manifest. As we said before, everything can be experienced as a blessing. The guru is the transformer box on the negative-to-positive circuit. Nirvana is our perception. Samsara is our perception. Once we understand that

neither one is more solid or "real" than the other, then the guru can help guide us toward the perception that creates greater happiness and brings an end to suffering for ourselves and others.

The Second Point: Devotion and Faith

The second important aspect of guru yoga is faith and devotion. Classical Tibetan Buddhist training distinguishes between faith and devotion, but that's not necessary here. What's important to know is that the games played by our intelligent and strategic egos are outmatched by devotion. Genuine devotion can melt down even the most hardened layers of aggressive ego-protection. This is completely necessary, because without softening our heart, our spiritual aspirations cannot mature. Impossible.

Saljay Rinpoche taught me that we work with three kinds of devotion: (1) inspired or pure devotion; (2) the devotion of longing, or the desire or wish to achieve something; and (3) the devotion of trust. He said: "Suppose you are making a journey across a desert or a flatland, such as the kind we have in southern Tibet. You have no car, no motorcycle, no camels. Just walking in the desert, with a brilliant sun shining and no clouds. Very hot. About halfway across, you realize that the journey is taking longer than you anticipated. You start running out of water. You keep looking up for rain. The sun beats down on your head, and the heat becomes unbearable. From the ground, the heat held by the sands rises up. You keep walking with heat coming from the sky, the ground, and the air. You become very thirsty, until all you think about is water. You long for water. This is the faith of longing.

Then in the distance, you see the edge of the flatland, and just beyond rises a beautiful emerald-green mountain with a pristine waterfall descending from its peak. Seeing this makes you very happy. This is the faith—or devotion—of inspiration. You feel the purity of this water, you taste it in your mind, and your faith in the possibility of what this offers inspires you to keep walking through the three heats. As you approach the waterfall, you think, 'This water will quench my thirst.' You trust this. This is the faith of trust."

After he finished this explanation, Saljay Rinpoche asked me, "Among these three kinds of faith, which is most important?"

I had gotten completely lost in the story, thinking, "I am just a little boy all by myself crossing the flatlands, and I am so hot and running out of water and I am thirsty. Maybe I will die." So then I just looked at Saljay Rinpoche, hoping that he would answer his own question.

"How do you develop the faith of trust?" he continued. "Through reasoning. First, when you organized your journey, you packed supplies, including water. As you came to the edge of the desert, you saw in the far distance green mountains and a waterfall, and seeing this made you happy. That feeling of happiness reflects pure devotion. Second, you desired to drink the water to quench your thirst, and that is desire-devotion, the devotion of longing. Third, if you drink the water with the firm belief that this water is good for you because it eliminates thirst, that is devotion with trust. You trust because you have experience of how and why it works. Then the inspiration and longing come automatically."

How do we develop faith and devotion to the guru? We recognize that in essence our teacher is the same as the Buddha. The teacher, the guru, and all the buddhas have identical buddha nature. The student too has buddha nature. This is according to absolute reality. If we recognize this, it becomes absolute guru yoga practice. But from the view of relative reality, devotion becomes the means by which we see that the teacher is buddha, and it becomes the means by which we develop pure perception. We rely on the wisdom of absolute reality to accept that the gurus, the buddhas, and ourselves are indivisible, unified from beginningless time, and that the inherent unity of our mind with the guru's has always existed. Now we have become aware of this. We understand that all perception is an emanation of mind.

What's important is not to use our relative-reality mind to analyze and judge and try to figure out if our teacher really is a buddha or not; it's important that by using the relative means of devotion, we perceive our teacher as a buddha. This perception really helps nourish faith in our capacity to see ourselves as a buddha.

Ancient texts take the authenticity of the guru for granted. Yet in

our degenerate times, we cannot find perfect teachers. If the teacher has obscurations, then we risk taking bad advice, so how can we apply devotion and pure perception? My father told me never to go against my own intuitive wisdom in order to follow the guru's advice. Of course, if the advice concerns dharma, we think about it very carefully. If the advice concerns worldly things then, my father told me, we definitely have no obligation to follow it.

These days students mix up dharma and worldly questions. They ask the guru about dharma practice and about which house to buy. In one meeting they ask about meditation, jobs, and relationship problems. My father explained that even if the student asks about worldly things, no vows are broken if they do not follow the guru's worldly advice.

Many modern students follow teachers around and accumulate empowerments and transmissions and take many teachings. But this is not a substitute for practice. Pure students don't hang around the teachers that much. They come for instruction, or guidance, or clarification, and then they go off and practice. If we perceive our teacher as a buddha, we receive the blessings of the buddhas. But blessings relate to the power of interdependence and do not simply fall out of the sky. They do not exist independent of our mind. Nothing does. The capacity to receive and benefit from blessings comes from our side, which comes from practice.

There is a Tibetan story that illustrates this. A wandering, uneducated lama asked a family for shelter in their house. In order to impress the family and receive extra money and food, he would have to invent something more special than OM MANI PEME HUNG. This was the one mantra that he knew, but so did every child in Tibet. So he started muttering nonsense syllables very fast: "OM VAJ LA TURE HUNG SO BENZA HA blah blah." The family felt convinced that it was a great blessing to welcome this high lama into their home.

The next morning, the woman told the lama, "You are the living buddha, and I have waited so long for you to come. Now I am requesting that you please give me the transmission for Green Tara practice." The lama did not know Green Tara. He scratched his head and said, "Ah, ummm, haw . . . I am not sure that you are ready to receive this high teaching."

But the woman insisted, "You cannot leave without teaching me Green Tara."

Finally he asked her to bring some water and uncooked rice. When she returned, he instructed her to sit before him. He muttered many syllables, threw rice over her head, and instructed her to drink purified water, and then he told her she had received the transmission. Next he instructed her to sit in silence for a few minutes with her eyes closed, and then he would teach her the mantra.

While she was sitting there, he turned his head right and left, trying to figure out what to do. Beyond the doorway he watched the woman's young daughter sweeping the mud floor. Through an open window, a shaft of sunlight illuminated specks of dust rising through the air. He began thinking, "Soon we will all be dust. I will be dust, the woman and the daughter too, and what I tell her will make no difference." Then he told the woman to open her eyes and said, "Because of your devotion and pure faith, I am teaching you the secret, esoteric Green Tara mantra that only very few people know. But only on the condition that you cannot repeat this to anyone and can only whisper it to yourself." Then he told her: "DOLMA SATHU LU LU." The lama then continued on his way. Every day the woman happily recited her mantra. Soon Green Tara appeared in her dreams, making her feel more blessed.

One day a truly great *mahapandita*—a great teacher-scholar—came through the village. The woman approached him, whispering "DOLMA SATHU LU LU." Still, the mahapandita could hear clearly, and she was saying, "Tara, there is nothing left but dust."

The mahapandita became alarmed and asked "What are you saying?" She explained that this was a rare, esoteric Green Tara mantra given to her in great secrecy. "I am really sorry to tell you," said the mahapandita, "that this is not the correct mantra. For Green Tara you need to say OM TARE TU TARE TURE SVA HA."

The woman was very moved by the mahapandita's concern for her spiritual welfare. She apologized and promised to say the mantra correctly. But Green Tara no longer appeared in her dreams. Then one night Green Tara appeared to the mahapandita in his dream and told

him, "You should not have caused the old lady to regret her mantra. That was a mistake."

On waking, the mahapandita rushed to the woman's house and said, "I am sorry. I have just learned that the mantra that you had been reciting is the ancient, secret, most prized Green Tara teaching, and you should return to that."

The lady told him, "I thought that might be the case. Because with your mantra, I could not see Green Tara."

The power of faith and inspiration work this way. At the same time, even if our teacher is actually the most sublime buddha, if we do not have pure perception we cannot know this and cannot see this. When Milarepa first saw Marpa, all he saw was a farmer laboring in the fields. When Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche came out of Tibet, he went to Kolkata where he chose to live on the streets as a beggar among the homeless sadhus. He chose to practice in a difficult way, in the midst of suffering, without the protection of clothing, shelter, or regular meals, without the protection that his own reputation afforded. We call this kind of practice "adding dry wood to the fire." First we develop an unwavering realization, and then we intentionally add obstacles and difficult circumstances to make our realization burn even hotter.

If I had seen Khen Rinpoche then, dirty and almost naked, with long matted hair, I cannot say that I would have recognized his enlightened qualities. If we do not have pure perception, even the Buddha himself will not appear to us. If we have devotion and pure perception, we can progress rapidly on our path with a pure teacher who might be only a few steps ahead of us, but can still aid the process of realization through pure perception.

The Third Point: The Karmic Connection

The third important aspect of guru yoga is making the karmic connection to the buddhas through the guru. Our buddha nature remains unawake until we break the cycle of samsara; until then, we remain like bees buzzing around in loops. We need help from beings who know

more than we do. If we connect to the realized mind of the guru, then we can make a connection to all the buddhas through prayers and supplications. Seeing the teacher's body, hearing the teacher's voice, and receiving the guru's teaching is the best connection for dharma. That's why the texts say that the buddhas and bodhisattvas are like the sun in space, and their blessings are like sunlight.

Saljay Rinpoche explained to me that our obscurations are like garbage. If we want to burn the garbage, we put it under the sun. Actually the sun cannot burn garbage so easily, but if we hold a magnifying glass over the garbage, it will catch fire. The glass intensifies the power of the sun's rays, and the garbage of our ignorance burns up quickly. Our guru is the magnifying glass; the Buddha is the sun.

When we think about the buddhas and their enlightened qualities, the separation between them and us is so great that we cannot identify with them. Inconceivable. But the gurus eat and sleep and use the bathroom just like us. They get tired, grow bald, and wear eyeglasses. They replace their socks, just like us. Still, we admire their selfless behavior, and we can flourish under their kind guidance. At the same time, the very human qualities of the guru also mean that it's easy to find traits that we like and dislike, that we respect and do not respect.

One time Milarepa was teaching at a big outdoor dharma festival. By this time he was already revered throughout the land and had many disciples. But on that particular day, two scholars in the crowd were very jealous of Milarepa's fame and popularity. These scholars were not practitioners. They were there to judge Milarepa's knowledge, not to receive his wisdom. They had strong, untamed emotions and had conspired to make Milarepa lose face.

With their strategy all figured out, the scholars arrived at the teachings with many of their own followers. At first they sat quietly and listened politely, but then one scholar stood up and shouted out, "You are the great yogi and must know all the logic of the ancient texts."

"I do not study texts," Milarepa answered. "I do not even know the difference between *tsema* and *chemma*." In Tibetan, *tsema* means "correct logic," and *chemma* refers to a vegetable dish.

Milarepa (1040–1123), Tibetan poet-saint and fourth holder of the Kagyu lineage.

Then the scholar said, "How can you know anything if you don't study? The result of correct logic is truth."

Milarepa, who was famous for teaching through songs, replied by singing:

I met the correct teacher
and received the correct pith instruction
and I went to the correct mountain
and with correct me
practicing the correct Dharma
I achieved correct realization.

This made the seated scholar so angry that he scooped up a handful of dirt, jumped to his feet, and threw it at Milarepa. Such disrespect

caused many of that scholar's followers to leave the *shedra*—a monastic college.

But the one who asked the question thought about Milarepa's response, and a few weeks later he visited Milarepa to ask dharma questions. In the following years he became a great realized yogi. The one who threw the dirt continued to scorn Milarepa, but a few years later he died.

Later Milarepa said of those two: "Both made a connection—one good connection, one bad. But even the one with the bad connection will be liberated from samsara after a few more lifetimes." That is the power of karmic connection.

This concludes the three most important aspects of our guru yoga practice: taking fruition as path, devotion and faith, and making the karmic connection. Now we move on to the four important considerations to apply when choosing a guru.

Choosing a Teacher

Tibetans say, "When you meet a teacher, don't devour that person like a dog that gulps down meat without tasting it first." Investigate. Examine. This is the student's responsibility. Remember, we can complete Vajrayana teachings without having one special teacher. Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche had twenty-five gurus.

One reason to take our time is that most people come to a teacher, especially their first teacher, with no real understanding of what a master has to offer or even what they themselves are looking for, and their expectations may create confusion. Many of the greatest Tibetan masters in history shared the characteristic of never displaying the slightest indication of their wisdom mind. My father was like that. There was nothing shiny about his enlightenment. If he had gone to the market by himself, no one would have paid him any attention, which would have been fine with him.

The great master Patrul Rinpoche looked so much like a tramp that

he was often treated like one. There are many stories of how the caretakers or cooks in monasteries would try to kick him out when he showed up to see teachers or even to give teachings. Until they heard who he was, they could not perceive his qualities.

Once as Patrul Rinpoche was approaching Tsechu Monastery in Tibet, he passed by a retreat hut, and the monk there called out to him, "Hey old man, you do not have any nice clothing or good shoes. I will give you some clothes and feed you if you will clean my hut and cook for me, and clean the offering bowls and make offerings. Then maybe I can teach you sometimes."

Patrul Rinpoche said, "Oh, this sounds like a good deal." So he set about doing his chores impeccably, cleaning the shrine and making offerings and cooking.

The retreatant was very happy with this arrangement, and one day he said, "Now I will teach you some dharma from *Words of My Perfect Teacher,* the text of the great master Patrul Rinpoche." Patrul Rinpoche listened very respectfully and thanked the monk for his teachings.

This continued for many days. Then one morning, the lama noticed that the line of offering bowls on the shrine was not perfect. He scolded his old attendant, saying, "Did you not hear Patrul Rinpoche say that the offering bowls should be lined up perfectly?"

And Patrul Rinpoche said, "Oh, I am so sorry."

On the day of the full moon, Patrul Rinpoche said, "I would like to circumambulate the stupa at the temple today and have come to ask your permission. I will be back in time to prepare your midday meal." The monk gave his permission.

Patrul Rinpoche walked to the stupa and was making prayers and circumambulating when one of the administrative heads of the monastery recognized him and immediately began making prostrations in the middle of the muddy path. He offered him *katas* and was so happy and felt so blessed to have the great master visit his monastery. All the other people at the stupa, including monks and laypeople, wondered who this could be; soon word got around that it was the great Patrul Rinpoche. Everyone started crowding around to make prostrations and

receive blessings. He kept repeating, "Please stop, please. I am sorry to leave, but I have an important engagement and cannot stop here. Please allow me to pass." But more and more people came.

Soon the monk back in the hut began to wonder, "What happened to my old man? He is quite late." Suddenly he saw people coming from the direction of the monastery and he asked, "Did you see my old attendant?"

The people said, "We did not see any old attendant, but Patrul Rinpoche is at the stupa and everyone is receiving blessings, so he is probably there."

This made the monk a little angry, and he thought, "As soon as the old man cooks my lunch, I will leave and go see Patrul Rinpoche myself."

A while later, he saw an old man coming down the road surrounded by people bowing and prostrating and offering *katas*. The monk thought, "That could not be my old man." When the crowd got closer, he saw that it was him. He became so embarrassed that he ran into his house and locked the door and all the windows and hid.

Patrul Rinpoche stood outside the door, saying, "Please let me in. I am so sorry that I am late. I have returned to cook your lunch." Then he walked all around the house asking to please be let in, but the lama was too embarrassed to appear, and finally Patrul Rinpoche left.

Who among us would have acted differently than that monk? If we apply worldly values to our search, we may end up with a worldly teacher. So we might want to cultivate some sense of what qualities we are looking for. However, once we take teachings, we automatically become that teacher's student, so it's important to investigate first. We can ask around, read the teacher's books, watch their videos, or listen to audio materials.

If a teacher is not qualified, not authentic, then it's like the blind leading the blind. If you allow blind faith to dictate your choice of guru, then you might chose a blind teacher, and this blind teacher might lead you over a cliff. In these degenerate times, it's almost impossible to find a perfect teacher. Even if the teacher is 100 percent perfect, the student may not have enough wisdom to know that. Anyway, the guru does not choose the student; the student chooses the guru, and guidelines exist for making that choice.

The Four Considerations for Choosing a Teacher

The four considerations for choosing a teacher are: an examination of the lineage, the teacher's practice history, the teacher's compassion and willingness to take care of the student, and the teacher's discipline with regard to maintaining whatever vows he or she has taken. This is not information that you can look up on the Internet. You need to do a little work. But if your assessments check out and there is a heart connection between you and the teacher, your efforts will be worthwhile.

The First Consideration: Examining the Lineage of the Guru

The lineage of a guru cannot guarantee a teacher's trustworthiness. Yet these considerations are meant as guidelines, not guarantees, and lineage provides an excellent place to start. Through hundreds of years, contributions from enlightened beings have enriched these lineages through oral teachings, written texts, and scholarly commentaries. Also the art and imagery enhance the history of the lineage, as well as the legends and stories of the great masters. No one teacher equals the magnitude of lineage, but the teacher brings us into the lineage.

Imagine entering a university that specializes in the subject that most interests you, like some aspect of science, art, or history. You have access to the cumulative wisdom of professors, senior students, peers, libraries, databases, and so forth. The richness of experience and knowledge is vast, and you are there to drink it in. That's our job. What an amazing opportunity—and it's the same for dharma lineages. With lineage, the practice becomes alive and transformative. It never dries up and becomes boring and stagnant, the way it can with just using books.

What if we come across a teacher who has no lineage? No predecessors? A teacher who reveres not one living master? Or a teacher who puts down other teachers and makes himself or herself appear to be better than they are? It is best to avoid those who advertise themselves as ultimate masters, or self-acclaimed adepts, or who promote their own realization. In Vajrayana, we say that if a teacher claims to have

clairvoyant powers, or to perform miracles, or says that he or she has a direct message from the Buddha, or advertises special energies and healing capabilities, or a high level of realization, then there is definitely something wrong. This is not an authentic teacher.

It's the student's responsibility to check the lineage and ask the lineage masters: "What do you think of this person? Is he or she a worthy teacher or not? Do the other lineage holders support this person or not?" Check with your own peers, and check with the teacher's peers.

The Second Consideration: The Guru's Practice History

The teacher must have a history of practice, meditation, and study. If we want to learn dharma, we must study with someone who knows more than we do, who has more experience, more practice history, and more understanding. Someone's history can tell a lot about their real interests. What are they truly committed to? Deepening their own understanding? Helping their students? Helping their own gurus? Taking care of others? Speak to other students about this teacher. Of course there will always be surprises; we can't figure out everything in advance.

The Third Consideration: The Guru Must Take Care of the Students

Students choose their teachers. Once the teacher agrees to accept a student, that teacher has a responsibility to guide the student toward enlightenment to the very best of their capacities. Students should have a sense that the teacher is in their court, trying to help them on this journey, and caring about their spiritual maturation. It is the kindness and compassion of the guru, the kinship and friendliness, that makes the journey alive and wholehearted. We cannot feel the strong pulse of dharma from texts and dead masters alone.

It is important to keep in mind that no two students are alike. Differences in personality and neuroses mean that guidance tailored to help one student might hinder another. For this reason, a student cannot

always understand how a guru is relating to others, because no two students are exactly alike.

The most important point is that the student needs complete trust that their teacher is making every effort to help them on their path toward liberation for the benefit of all beings. That does not make the teacher a perfect person. But it makes that teacher perfectly qualified with regard to this consideration.

The Fourth Consideration: Maintaining Vows

The fourth consideration when choosing a teacher concerns the teacher's discipline with regard to the vows that he or she undertook—or, to put it another way, to check if the teacher is keeping *samaya,* which is a term only used in Vajrayana. *Samaya* means to maintain unwavering respect toward the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and in the case of Vajrayana, the guru.

Some Westerners have the idea that leaving a teacher is breaking samaya, but this is not necessarily true. If after a period of study, you conclude that the teacher is not suitable, then it's best to cut the connection. There are no rules in Vajrayana that say you have to stick with a teacher no matter what. Definitely not. If you have 100 percent proof that the teacher is not qualified according to these four considerations, then you should cut the ties, and you can even discuss the situation with other people. This is completely legitimate. If the teacher does not have these four qualities, and we have proof of inappropriate activities, then we are not breaking samaya by telling others. If the teacher is affiliated with a monastery, the best option is to discuss these issues with that person's superior.

There was a situation concerning a tulku in the monastery nearest my own monastery in Kham in eastern Tibet. This tulku was one of the main teachers for the young monks as well as a senior administrator. But he developed an attachment to a woman in the village. Several times he was discovered missing from his room at night, and rumors in the village and in the monastery became the subject of endless gossip. This

tulku had grown up in this monastery, so everyone knew the nature of his vows; if the rumors were correct, he had violated them.

When people live in a tight-knit monastic community, each person's behavior affects the entire community. Imagine twenty people rowing a boat forward, when suddenly one person decides to move the oars in the opposite direction. This throws the whole boat off course, and the atmosphere can become poisoned. The program for young monks is a training ground, and they need to be inspired by their teachers, not let down or disturbed.

Many junior monks were going to monks in the administration and complaining about this tulku's behavior; but they had no proof, and the tulku himself kept denying the rumors. Without proof, nothing could be done. Finally everyone became fed up with the rumors and gossip and confusion. One night after a snowstorm, some senior monks followed the tulku's footprints and caught him at the home of the woman. He was dismissed from the monastery. Eventually he married his lady friend, and they had children. He visited the monastery on special occasions as a layperson, but could not practice inside the dharma hall.

Pragmatically speaking, we do not always know the exact nature of a teacher's vows. And we do not always know what kind of flexibility is built into those vows by the lineage. Also we already know from many examples in the East and West that whenever a teacher is accused of inappropriate behavior by one or many students, other students step up to defend that teacher. So accusations are not easy to confirm. However, if we feel that a teacher is behaving badly, even without proof, we should probably leave, because under those circumstances we may not be receptive to learning from this person. That is reason enough to move on, but try to leave in a neutral way, without animosity. We neither encourage others to study with this teacher nor discourage them.

A lot of times, especially in the West, students fault themselves for seeing the teacher with impure perception. If they have any criticisms or negativities about the guru, they blame themselves. This is of no benefit. If this teacher-student relationship is not working to help us on

our path, it's the student's responsibility to make a change. In this case, try to make the change without leaving a sour taste in your mouth.

The Balance Sheet

Considering how truly alien the concept of guru is in the West, the most important questions are the simplest: "Is this helping me? Am I more inspired to practice? Does this situation support my aspirations or not?" Sometimes students spend a lot of time making a balance sheet: "There are these good things, and then there are these bad things. Which outweighs which? What should I do?"

If you cannot benefit from the teachings, or if the situation becomes an obstacle for your path, then you should leave it in a neutral way. Saljay Rinpoche said that if our balance sheet shows about 70 to 80 percent positive, that's pretty good. If it's 70 to 80 percent negative, then it's best to leave and does not break samaya. But try not to create a lot of negativity around the situation.

If you go from teacher to teacher, always disappointed, always complaining, and always feeling betrayed by each teacher's behavior or personality, then you need to question what you are looking for. Many modern people look for a guru in the same way as they would a marriage partner: seeking Mr. or Mrs. Perfect. Impossible. A conceptual ideal gets developed that even Shakyamuni Buddha himself could not fulfill. That approach to "an ultimate best" doesn't work in marriage, and it doesn't work with teachers. There is no perfection in samsara, and that includes gurus and partners.

Flesh-and-blood gurus have personalities with inclinations, tendencies, karma, and tastes. If you concentrate on personality traits, you will always find fault, guaranteed. One guru eats meat and that is terrible, another eats candies all day, and another slurps soup too loudly. One Buddhist teacher was told that he could not be enlightened because he was fat. Another horrified his students because he liked to watch boxing on television. Some teachers like women, others like beer, and one buys maroon cashmere socks in London. "Terrible. Just terrible." But none

of these behaviors tell us anything about a teacher's capacity to guide us on our path. When used as criticisms, most of these descriptions are simply behaviors that one does not like, or does not approve of, or that one judges just as one would friends. The biases and opinions formed through culture, class, and personal preferences come into play.

We often judge the guru in terms of the relative. But the role of the guru is to lead us to the absolute nature of ourselves. That is why we speak about the benefits of pure perception and of seeing the guru as the buddha. Looking subjectively at the mundane aspect of the teacher's behavior will never serve us well if our aspirations for enlightenment are genuine. This is why Saljay Rinpoche told me: "The essence of the guru is the guru. You cannot receive any blessings from this ordinary form. The real teacher is the wisdom essence of this body, speech, and mind."

The Buddhist caves at Ellora and Ajanta in India contain massive buddhas and halls made from rock-cut architecture. The face of the rock was chiseled away to create precise, monumental structures. Nothing was added. No form was carved out and added to another. Every image and shape emerged from eliminating layers of rock and mud. Someone looked at the side of a mountain and saw an assembly of buddhas. It took a shift in view.

When I first arrived at Sherab Ling, I was disappointed that an old, toothless guy with a cane had to be my guru. But once I got a taste of what he knew and what he had to teach me, I concentrated on that. It's not that the physical body of the guru disappears or that we perceive it as the most beautiful form in the world. What we see shifts. The guru's mind is essentially no different than anyone else's mind, including our very own mind. But how we perceive that mind can help access our own best qualities.

Three Styles of Working with Gurus

There are basically three styles of working with gurus. In the first, we choose one particular teacher who is our main, root teacher. We might take teachings from other teachers, especially those in the same lineage as this guru, but there is no question about who our main teacher is. The

second style is to have many teachers, without having any particular root or main guru. The third style is what we call the automatic guru.

The First Style: Taking One Root Teacher

Having one teacher for one lifetime works very well for many people. A strong sense of trust can develop, whereby the student's openness to the guru over time can increase the opportunities for the teacher to help this person work with their mind, their aversions, and their self-imposed mental constructs.

But this is just one style. It's common among Westerners to feel that one special guru is necessary, or that they have to be very intimate and tell the guru everything—about family, relationships, money problems, and to ask the guru's advice about where to live, what house to purchase, and what stocks to buy—almost like being married. Then if an opportunity to take teachings from another teacher arises, it feels like betraying the guru. This is not quite right, and the closeness can work in reverse. Too much emphasis gets put onto the person, or onto that person's personality and characteristics, or onto the relationship.

In the West, Tibetan teachers are still not that common, and genuine dharma students may only have access to one teacher. Yet this is changing rapidly as more Tibetan teachers travel regularly and as more of their Western disciples become teachers. But there is also an idea of "oneness" that creeps into this situation that can become out of balance: "I have only one father and one mother and one husband or wife, and now I have one teacher. I used to have one God and one church, and now I have one teacher."

The tighter the fixation on "my one guru," the harder it is to comprehend Saljay Rinpoche's teaching: "The essence of the guru is the guru." The personality traits of the guru—good, bad, or neutral—are not the source of wisdom or blessings. The benefits available from the guru magnify when the guru is perceived as the essence of the guru, and also as the essence of all the buddhas and all the enlightened beings in the ten directions. Real dharma nourishment comes with this expansion, this radiant wisdom of the guru's mind. We might say that the

amplification comes by allowing the individuated guru to melt into the field of merit and wisdom, where he or she unites with all the buddhas. But the tighter we bind the guru with the person and personality into "my one and only guru," the less the guru becomes the object of the pure perception that reflects back to us. This reflected pure perception is what benefits us the most.

Because the guru-disciple relationship is so new for Westerners, it will take time before it's understood with any consistency. It's understandable that some Westerners expect the guru to function in ways similar to other authority figures in their society, such as parents, bosses, generals, police officers, or psychiatrists. All of these projections can be worked with—if the student is willing to bring the issues into the realm of dharma.

Sometimes people tell me about their childhoods, what their mother did to them, what their father said, and about this one sibling, until the story includes the entire family history. Meanwhile I am wondering: "Where is the dharma question? Where is the opening? Where is the opportunity for practice?" A teacher does not have to be a therapist to see the fixations, the grasping, the anger, or the jealousy. But sometimes when I introduce practices that can help alleviate these problems, I meet resistance. Then I might wonder, "Gee, maybe this person wants a therapist, not a dharma friend."

When students ask about psychological issues, marital problems, family dramas, and so forth, my own general response is to try to turn the conversation to dharma so that I can suggest activities, practices, or prayers that I hope can help. Generally, with non-dharma questions, I try to turn people's minds toward their own wisdom, their own inclinations and knowledge. With a little encouragement, people can usually arrive at the answer to their own worldly questions. If the person is willing to use dharma teachings to help themselves, then I have a role to play.

Many people come to dharma because they are in some emotional crisis or experience chronic mental suffering. That makes sense. But they may want their guru to solve all their psychological issues. Somehow they have the mistaken idea that solving their problems is the guru's

job, rather than taking their problems to the path of meditation and study. Nowadays many students spend more time following the gurus than they do practicing. The great masters of Tibet went to their gurus to receive teachings or to clarify their instructions, and then they left to practice. The point is not how or where we practice, but rather not to confuse practice with being around a teacher. We need to nurture our own inner guru.

Tibet had a lot of gurus. Good, bad, and fake gurus. This is normal. Many people accomplish name and fame by being a big person in government or in trade, and some people accomplish social status by setting up shop as a guru. Unavoidable. But in old Tibet, and even today among the exile communities, some kind of "quality control" prevails. If a teacher behaves badly, say by speaking disapprovingly of the abbot, or if such a person compromises the monastery through inappropriate behavior, peers affiliated with that lineage or monastery take action. The first efforts involve private discussions aimed at giving the person another chance. But if someone continues to adversely affect a community or lineage, they get "fired," so to speak.

Not long ago, there was a case of a tulku in Nepal who had some education but had been breaking his vows. He had been misrepresenting his spiritual accomplishments to the young monks in the monastery as well as to laypeople. He would say that he was a realized master, able to see the buddhas and bodhisattvas. He talked like this to sponsors as well. Apparently he took money from sponsors on behalf of the monastery. But then, after everyone else was asleep, he changed from his robes to lay clothing and spent this money drinking whiskey and dancing at nightclubs in Kathmandu. He even bought himself a car, so he was certainly not discreet about accumulating funds. This person disrespected those who had tried to help him and refused to make corrections.

Finally the head of the monastery called a meeting. Many lineage masters from different monasteries were joined by other lamas and monks, and the tulku was present. In front of this assembly, the abbot publicly denounced him, saying "You cannot represent yourself as affiliated with this lineage or monastery." He also stripped him of his tulku status. He could not use that to promote himself anymore, and he lost

his credibility. Being a tulku does not mean that this person can do anything: a tulku must abide by the rules and ethics and style of a monastery just like anyone else, or face being reprimanded or ousted.

Every community inevitably experiences disturbances. What's important is how people deal with them. Problems also arise when isolated teachers are living and working without a community of peers. In Taiwan, fifteen or twenty years ago, there were several Taiwanese who claimed to be Vajrayana lineage holders and named themselves "Rinpoche This and Rinpoche That," and said things like, "I am the second Buddha." Since there were no alternative teachers, they did quite well for themselves. But when authentic lineage holders started to teach in Taiwan, the fakes couldn't maintain their charade. Once people were given a choice, the difference between false and true became obvious, and today the situation in Taiwan is much better.

In old Tibet, the isolation of villages offered little protection from fake lamas who traveled among peasant communities dressed in nice robes and perhaps holding a mala and a prayer wheel. Maybe they would sit at the village stupa with their chins jutting out and recite OM MANI PEME HUNG. Even though every child in Tibet knows this mantra, they could still get enough in their alms bowl to make the deception pay off.

The Second Style: Having Many Teachers

If we make a connection to one teacher, fine. If we make many connections, fine. Just keep practicing. The First Khyentse Rinpoche, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo [1820–92], traveled the entire width of Tibet for more than a decade, seeking out genuine, profound teachings without regard to lineage. He had 125 root lamas. His openness to many lineages and teachers—and his superior understanding of all the teachings—led him to initiate an approach to Buddhist practice that came to be known as the nonsectarian Rime ["ree-may"] movement. The great Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who subsequently followed these footsteps of utmost openness, was said to have received teachings from over fifty masters.

The important point is to apply the four considerations to however many teachers we may study with. In general, even if we are attracted to studying with several teachers over a period of time, there should still be some real heart connection with each one, or some genuine motive. The teacher is like the flower, the dharma is like the nectar, and the student is like the bee. We can go to many flowers to collect the nectar of dharma.

Sometimes circumstances require patience, such as my case with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. After our initial meeting in Bhutan during Dilgo Khyentse's cremation ceremonies, I saw Khen Rinpoche a few times when we were both visiting Kathmandu. I always learned something from him, but not through formal teachings. In 1994 I joined the shedra affiliated with Sherab Ling. I spent most of my vacations at Nagi Gompa, and during this period I asked my father many questions about meditation. But he always gave me the same reply: "As I told you before, you should receive teachings from Khen Rinpoche."

The Nyongtri lineage started with Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche. Both came from India in the eighth century C.E., and are revered for planting the seeds of Buddhism in Tibet and for bringing with them the precious pith instructions of the Nyongtri lineage. Vimalamitra said that the lineage should be preserved with one master teaching one student, until degenerate times would call for these profound teachings to become more available.

Five signs define degenerate times. The first sign is the rise of nonvirtuous activities such as warfare, murders, and animal slaughter. The second sign is when personal emotions such as anger, jealousy, and revenge are misused for political or military ends resulting in tremendous suffering for masses of people. The third sign pertains to degenerate views, such as when people blindly trust in the limitations of their own understanding and act to satisfy their own short-term desires, thus valorizing fame, greed, and money. The fourth sign is extreme problems caused by the four elements: flooding, earthquakes, droughts, fires, tsunamis, and hurricanes. The last sign is the rise of new diseases and epidemics, such as HIV, herpes, or hepatitis.

After I first asked Khen Rinpoche for teachings, some time passed before I had an opportunity to return to Bhutan. While I was studying at

the shedra—I made a plan with my brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche to travel together from Nepal to Bhutan during a spring break. Everything was arranged, and I was in Nepal. One problem: I could not get my visa. Each day I checked the mail and called the visa office. Meanwhile, my six weeks of vacation were running out. Then Tsoknyi Rinpoche had his own program to attend, and it was not certain that Khen Rinpoche would even teach me. Through a friend, I learned that if I arrived in Bhutan by land, I could get my visa at the border crossing. So I did this. But it turned out that Khen Rinpoche was not in Thimphu. He was in Tarpaling in eastern Bhutan, holding a big *puja*—a ritual ceremony. This particular one lasted for eleven days and nights, twenty-four hours a day. When I arrived in Tarpaling I explained, "My father sent me and I really want to receive teachings . . ."

He said, "You can join the puja," but he did not actually say yes to my request. So I joined the puja for one day, two days, three days. Every evening we had dinner together, but still no teachings. On the last day of the puja, he gave me a general introduction to Dzogchen. Then he asked me to come to Thimphu.

Thimpu sits at the bottom of a narrow, forested valley, and Rinpoche's house was at the base of a mountain. It was a two-story house made from concrete and wood, with an extension on the ground floor where we sometimes did ritual practices. Above were the living quarters, which included a small room where I stayed. Once we were back at his house, he taught me every day. For ten weeks, I had to practice three sessions a day for two or two-and-a-half hours each. There were no texts. No study. Working only mind to mind, heart to heart, and then practicing on my own and meeting with him. Throughout this process, he would decide whether it was time to proceed or not.

My four main teachers were closely connected through lineage and their own practice histories, so the teachings of each one continuously deepened and affirmed the others. Yet sometimes if you have many gurus, you may encounter contradictory instructions due to different styles, or different traditions, or different understanding, and so forth. For example, according to one teacher, you should do ngondro in the

traditional sequence—as presented here—but another guru says you can practice different parts simultaneously. In that case, just pick one teacher and stay with his or her instructions for the duration of the ngondro, or for another specific practice. Then you can use a different teacher for another practice. If you have many teachers, then with a practice such as ngondro, you can imagine Vajradhara as the essence of all those different teachers, or of the particular teacher that authorized a specific practice.

No matter how many teachers we may choose, even if it's 125, each should meet the qualifications to the best of our knowledge and assessment. If the teachers do meet these qualifications, and if they have a connection with us, then we can benefit from the teachings.

Of my four main teachers, only His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche is physically alive, and I feel fortunate to still have access to this perfect and authentic teacher. But on the deepest level, I never experience one teacher as being alive or another dead because they are all with me, always, and I still seek their blessings. Sometimes I miss the relative appearance of those no longer here, but the mind and heart connection is always with me.

The Third Style: Automatic Style

In addition to choosing one teacher or many teachers, we have a third category called automatic style. This occurs when we receive instructions that directly point out the nature of our own mind, and we actually recognize the nature of our own mind. This teacher then automatically becomes one of our "root" teachers. If we have already chosen one teacher prior to this, then we'll have two teachers. No problem.

An example of this occurred with my father's uncle. He was six or seven years old when he left home to study at a monastery. He had already been identified as a tulku, so he was treated very well. Nonetheless he arrived at the monastery with the habits of a very naughty boy. He was always looking for ways to sneak away from his tutors and attendant, and run down the hill to play with the children in the

village. One day, he was playing with some boys near the village stupa when a toothless, bent, old lady holding a mala in one hand and a prayer wheel in the other recognized him. She yelled out, "Hey kid, what are you doing here?"

All the little boys stopped playing and moved close to each other as if for safety. But the old lady continued to look straight at my father's uncle, and in a scolding tone she said, "You should not be in the village. You are supposed to be at the monastery, learning meditation and studying Buddhist texts. You're wasting your time playing here."

The boy said, "What are you talking about? What is meditation?"

And the old lady said, "Ha! What a funny kid you are! You don't know what meditation is?"

The boy turned to his friends but they just shrugged, and so he turned back to the old lady and shrugged too and shook his head. "I don't know."

"It's like you turn your eyes inward to the back of your head and look at your mind," said the old lady.

So the little boy turned his attention inward as if looking toward the back of his head, and boom!—he recognized nature of mind. This experience left him feeling very vast, spacious, and ordinary. Then he climbed the hill back to the monastery and asked his tutors for meditation instruction.

As my father's uncle grew up, he received many teachings from many great masters, but he said that nothing he learned was greater than what that old lady taught him. He always said, "That old lady was my first guru."

This concludes the three ways of choosing gurus. Now we can get into some details of the practice itself.

Being Vajrayogini

When we imagine being Vajrayogini, we have a sense of the enlightened qualities of the deities, and we might think, "Light is emanating from me. I have boundless wisdom and compassion. I am confident

and peaceful. My essence is the union of clarity and emptiness." We no longer just imagine the inner life of the Buddha "out there." We are no longer preparing to be a buddha. We are not praying to become a buddha, or practicing generosity, discipline, meditation, or any of the paramitas in order to become buddhas. We *are* buddhas.

Vajrayogini, mother of all the buddhas, appears in different forms, with different names, colors, and postures. For our guru yoga practice, a bright-red Vajrayogini stands upright upon a flat moon disk, which covers a sun disk, both floating slightly above a lotus. Her physical features—stance, color, hair, and facial expression—emit tremendous whirling energy, as if photographed midway through a dance step. Her

Vajrayogini, female buddha, of principal importance in the Kagyu lineage.

three eyes see the past, present, and future. Her right leg represents absolute reality and so she keeps it raised, freed from samsara, with her knee bent and turned away from her body. The left leg represents relative reality, and she keeps her left foot planted on a sprawled human corpse. The outer meaning of the corpse is impermanence; the inner meaning is that the ego has been killed; the "I" or "self" of ego-fixation has been destroyed. The secret meaning is that relative and absolute realities now manifest in union because the ego-manufacturer of infinite dualities has been shut down. Now the union of samsara and nirvana—the very nature of reality—can manifest.

Vajrayogini's torso leans to the right. Her face, tilted to the left, represents dharmakaya, the form of emptiness. Blazing flames encircle her body, eliminating the darkness of ignorance. Her two arms represent wisdom and compassion. In her right hand, raised upward to the sky, she brandishes a small curved knife for cutting through the ego and the three poisons of grasping, anger, and ignorance. Her left hand, close to her chest, holds a skull cup filled with the blood-red nectar of bodhichitta, which represents achievement. Red expresses desire, and she has fulfilled her desire to cut the obscurations of ego and achieve wisdom in order to help all sentient beings attain enlightenment. Remember she is not made of blood and bones but of light. Even though she manifests with brilliant color and energetic intensity, she remains transparent, lucid, and without substance.

We still have obscurations. But we must recognize that we embody the essence of buddha qualities, because if we approach this practice with our conventional body and our ordinary mind, we cannot receive the blessings that are transmitted mind to mind from buddha to buddha. Being the Buddha Vajrayogini makes this workable.

Vajrayogini is one of the main yidams in the Kagyu tradition. Sometimes Vajrayogini appears in union with a male consort. She represents the wisdom of emptiness, the mother of all buddhas, from which all forms arise. The male represents method and clarity, the clarity of form. Together they manifest the union of form and emptiness. These are not two deities coming together. They are one, manifesting as two, and

their qualities are inherently inseparable. But in the relative conceptual world that we inhabit in our practice, in order to go beyond the relative conceptual world, the female manifestation of wisdom is most important. For this particular guru yoga practice, we only use Vajrayogini's single form.

Vajrayogini has six bone ornaments, one for each of the six paramitas. In addition to other necklaces and ornaments, she wears five translucent scarves that represent the five types of wisdom, but she herself is naked, manifesting undressed mind, bare, pure, stripped of conceptual fixation.

We might be inspired to think, "I am Buddha in sambhogakaya form. Until now, I did not recognize that I am a buddha, but today I do!" We say "sambhogakaya" because Vajrayogini is a pure form: she does not grow old and die like the nirmanakaya form of Shakyamuni Buddha; yet unlike dharmakaya, the embodiment of emptiness, she has form. We think, "Now I have all the buddhas' enlightened qualities: oneness, wisdom, purity." We call this vajra pride. We manifest as Vajrayogini, but she has no inherent existence. She is a manifestation of emptiness, or of our buddha nature. Conventional pride arises with attachment to ego and makes us think that we are higher than others and more important. Here, pride arises from emptiness so we can increase confidence and capability, but without self, because everything arises from emptiness.

Imagining Vajradhara

Above our head sits Vajradhara, with a column of the lineage masters above his head. The highest figure on this column is Vajradhara again, representing the head of the lineage. Some people find it easier to imagine Vajradhara facing them. Above or in front doesn't matter. Again Vajradhara is sky-blue to indicate uncontrived, indivisible reality, beyond subject and object. He is the essence of all our teachers—whether we have one or many teachers. We can use the root guru who gave us this particular teaching. Vajradhara has the same color, ornaments, and posture as in the refuge and mandala practices. We do

not have to get too involved with all the lineage gurus. Mainly we focus on the lower Guru Vajradhara. Again, he sits on a lion throne with a lotus, sun, and moon seat.

As with all these practices, there are variations within lineages. The Nyingma school imagines Guru Padmasambhava instead of Vajradhara. Different buddha manifestations might be used other than Vajrayogini. Even within one lineage the liturgies vary, and some are quite extensive. Here we will go over the main aspects.

The Seven-Branch Offering

As part of a daily practice routine, generally ngondro students begin the first practice session of the day with a brief version of all the previous ngondro steps. So, for guru yoga, we would already be seated before our shrine. When beginning guru yoga practice, first try to dissolve all conceptual thoughts into emptiness. From emptiness, in our imagination we manifest as Vajrayogini. As Vajrayogini, we supplicate the guru and lineage masters with the seven-branch offering.

The seven-branch offering is not unique to guru yoga. Although it summarizes what we have done in ngondro, it initiates many practices, as it helps to generate devotion and receptivity and to stabilize the awakened qualities of body, speech, and mind. Seated in a correct posture, we supplicate Vajradhara, who embodies all the buddhas, enlightened beings, lineage masters, and gurus—including our own teacher—with the seven-branch offering: prostrations, offerings, confessions, rejoicing in the merit and virtue of others, imploring Buddha Vajradhara to continue to turn the wheel of dharma, and imploring Buddha Vajradhara to remain in samsara for the benefit of all beings. We end the seven-branch offering by dedicating the merit.

Prostrations

We imagine making prostrations to invoke the mind of paying homage, the mind of utmost devotion and reverence to the gurus of the three times who mirror the true nature of our mind. We do not stand up and

physically make prostrations. We *are* Vajrayogini. Our physical form remains seated, and from the heart center of our imagined, standing, red Vajrayogini wisdom body come thousands—infinite numbers—of emanation-replicas of our body. These emanations make prostrations to Buddha Vajradhara. As well, we can imagine that joining our emanations are all sentient beings throughout time and space. We maintain the image of Vajradhara as the embodiment of all the enlightened beings including our own teacher—we can imagine our root guru or the guru who gave us the transmission for this practice.

In addition to emanating our ordinary body, we can also emanate *dakas* and *dakinis* to prostrate with us. At the same time, we are reciting the seven-branch prayer and invoking the guru as the essence of all the buddhas, acknowledging the guru as the one who demonstrates to us that the nature of mind is truly dharmakaya. Also, prostrations are the best antidote to pride. Releasing the poison of pride helps prepare the mind for the offerings that follow.

Offerings

This includes the offerings of the mandala practice: universes, planets, our wealth, body, retinue, virtue, and everything imaginable in the universe that is worthy of offering. Again the mind of letting go is the best counter to the mind of grasping and attachment.

Confessions

Here we repeat the confession aspect of Vajrasattva: the acknowledgment of past harmful acts and the resolve not to repeat them. Again the confession is made by the emanation-replica of our ordinary form, which comes from Vajrayogini's heart center.

Rejoicing

Rejoicing in the success of others means letting go of competitiveness, jealousy, and envy, and nurturing the capacity to celebrate the virtuous

activities and merit of others, which at the same time generates merit for ourselves.

Turning the Wheel of Dharma

We implore Vajradhara and all the buddhas and bodhisattvas to turn the wheel of dharma. A buddha's appearance does not guarantee that this being will leave a legacy of teachings, because teachings only manifest when they are requested. So we request teachings with the aspiration to provide the opportunity for the wheel of dharma to be turned for the benefit of all sentient beings, so that they may know the ultimate end of suffering.

Remaining in Samsara

In acknowledgment of their role in radiating light within the darkness of samsara, we beseech the gurus, buddhas, and all wisdom beings who inhabit the nirmanakaya (human) form to remain among us as long as possible, and to manifest in ways accessible to us, with boundless wisdom and compassion to help all sentient beings become enlightened.

Dedication

We acknowledge that our guru in the form of Vajradhara has witnessed our practice with his or her own resolve to dedicate their merit and virtue to the enlightenment of all beings. We sincerely aspire to follow our guru's example by dedicating our own merit and virtue to the enlightenment of each and every being without exception.

The Six-Line Invocation

With the completion of the seven-branch prayer, we move to the six-line invocation of the guru. In the Kagyu lineage, this is the heart of the guru yoga ngondro practice. For the first time, we—as Vajrayogini—are

addressing the guru from within the wisdom body of an enlightened being.

> Precious Guru, I pray to you.
> Bless me that I may let go of this mind that fixates on self.
> Bless me that renunciation may take birth in my being.
> Bless me that unspiritual thoughts may come to an end.
> Bless me that I may realize my own mind to be unborn.
> Bless me that delusion may be pacified all on its own.
> Bless me that all that appears and exists may dawn as dharmakaya.

The first request for help—to let go of this mind that fixates on self—is the essence of the whole practice, of the whole dharma path. "I devoutly ask for your help in letting go of ego-clinging, of grasping, of this damaging attachment to 'I.'" If we can function from a place where the mind has let go of fixations and has been released from the grip of ego, then the natural, inherent enlightened qualities shine forth. The prayers that follow are aspects of this.

Renunciation works to release ego-fixation. It does not mean wearing robes and going to a cave. Any attempt to genuinely renounce the habits of ego amount to renunciation. Sitting on our meditation cushion reflects a commitment to renunciation. The deliberate effort to work with the monkey-mind—in a restaurant, during classes, or at the airport—invokes renunciation even if we think our efforts have failed. Every time we interfere with the habit of acting compulsively or greedily, we practice renunciation. Every time we use our awareness to cut the cord between the impulse and the activity of grasping, that's renunciation.

Unspiritual thoughts are activities of mind and body that deviate from helping others. On this path, everything begins and ends with bodhichitta, the wish to help all beings attain enlightenment. Any thought not connected to helping others is therefore unspiritual. If we let go of ego-fixations, if we renounce self-centered preoccupations,

then bodhichitta arises. We pray that those thoughts and habits that keep us bound to monkey-mind problems and selfishness come to an end. We pray to the guru to bless us so that we may eliminate negativity and unwholesome thoughts.

The unborn mind expresses the unfabricated, uncontrived original mind that neither arises nor disappears. It is not born; it does not die. Like space itself, it is unbound, indivisible, and limitless, and therefore all possibilities are available: enlightenment, buddhahood, bodhichitta, everything. So we pray to the guru to bless us that we may recognize this mind, unborn from beginningless time.

We pray for delusion to be pacified all on its own. We confront a lot of delusion in daily life. How do we go beyond that? Just thinking that delusion is no good doesn't help; looking for an antidote to delusion is itself a delusion. So the injunction here is to self-liberate the delusion. We do this with awareness. Awareness of delusion dissolves the delusion.

Finally we supplicate the guru for all that appears and exists to dawn as dharmakaya. This means to live with a complete recognition of the true nature of reality. Everything is experienced through pure perception. Samsara and nirvana are one. We pray that this recognition of awakened mind be attained by all sentient beings.

Alternating Meditation Styles in Guru Yoga

Different teachers assign different ways of practicing guru yoga. In some cases, 111,000 repetitions of the six-line prayer are required. We work this out with a qualified ngondro guide. Also, with this prayer, we can vary what the mind does during the repetitions. As with the previous practices, if our mind becomes dull or agitated, we alternate. For example, we can drop the visualization and rest in open awareness, or practice shamata without object. Or we can use the sound of the recitation as the object of shamata, or repeat the prayers with the focus on bodhichitta and think, "May I let go of ego-fixation for the benefit of all beings so that they may let go of ego-fixation and become enlightened." We deliberately bring to mind the compassionate wish

to lead all sentient beings to awakening. Or we can keep doing the repetitions while asking: "Who is praying to whom? Who is asking for what? Who is praying? Who is listening?" If we have received instructions for resting in the nature of mind, then we can also alternate with that meditation practice. We maintain the recitation during whichever meditation style we choose.

Vajrayana Empowerments

Through recitation, liturgy, and ritual, the guru empowers the practitioner with permission to undertake specific practices. It's an initiation, both in the sense of entering a sacred world through ceremony as well as beginning a process that needs our participation for fulfillment. Empowerments were held in ancient India when a new king succeeded to the throne; it was a way of bestowing confidence to help the new king recognize and fulfill his own powers. Here we are all new kings. These four empowerments, as well as the practices that they permit us to undertake, are all ways of recognizing our own treasures.

In my tradition, these empowerments—or what we call *abhishekas*—are generally conferred by the teacher to individual students or to a group of students. Here the four empowerments are imagined as part of our guru yoga meditation session and can be done intermittently throughout the practice session. However many times we do the empowerments within a session is up to us, but the sequence of four should be done each time. Each empowerment involves the removal of body, speech, and mind obscurations; directs us to a further path of meditation; and plants the seeds for the fruition of the four kayas: nirmanakaya, sambhogakaya, dharmakaya, and *svabhavikakaya,* which is the integration and essence of all the kayas.

Our physical body is seated before our shrine. Even if we have been practicing with Vajradhara above our Vajrayogini body, for the four empowerments we imagine Guru Vajradhara in front of us. And remember that he is the embodiment of all the gurus and buddhas. Choose whichever form is the most compelling, the most inspiring, but remember that in essence this form embodies all the buddhas.

First we allow the lineage buddhas above Vajradhara's head to dissolve into light. This light then merges with the lower Vajradhara. It is this one blue Vajradhara that we, as Vajrayogini, imagine to be in front of us and that we now face. We imagine that our ordinary self is inseparable from Vajrayogini. In this way, it is our ordinary form that benefits from the empowerments. We begin with the vase empowerment.

The Vase Empowerment

Vase, as we use it here, relates to physical form—shape, color, body, matter, as well as to the natural elements and the elements within our body. From the guru's forehead comes a beam of white light that enters our own Vajrayogini body at the place between our eyebrows. This dissolves physical obscurations such as illness and pain; it also purifies negative karma committed by bodily activity, such as harming or killing others. This empowerment bestows clarity of mind. This allows for pure perception, which means experiencing everything as a manifestation of pure, luminous awareness. Also, the empowerment authorizes us to proceed to the next stage. In this stage, called the development stage, the habits of impure perception are undermined by imagining oneself as a deity, and through mantras and imagination practices allowing the enlightened qualities of the deity to merge with and bring forth our own inherent buddha qualities. Even though the wisdom of the buddhas has no shape or color, we practice with shape and color. In this way, we plant the seed of becoming nirmanakaya—becoming a buddha within our human form. This "vase" represents the human form, which becomes the vessel or container for nirmanakaya.

The Secret Empowerment

Next, from Guru Vajradhara's throat comes a red light that enters our Vajrayogini throat, purifying the obscurations and negativities related to speech: lying, slander, defamation, gossip, and so forth. This allows us to enter the path of completion stage, which follows the development stage.

Within our mind we have the same wisdom and awareness as a buddha, and our body is also the same as a buddha's body. We practice the completion stage with the idea that our body is the wisdom aspect of a buddha. The gross level of the body is connected to air or wind, which manifests as speech. Then we practice with the body using physical training that involves the channels, breath, and wind energies. This is also taking fruition or result as path, because the bodily aspects that we work with—*prana, bindu, nadi*—are already within us. *Prana* refers to the wind or air energy that circulates through the channels of our body, and the *nadis* are the channels through which *prana* moves. *Bindu* refers to the "subtle drops" of energy elements in the body that are too small to be seen by the naked eye.

Bringing our awareness to these subtle body aspects and learning how to control and direct these inner energies in the completion stage practices can help advance and stabilize our effort to recognize the true emptiness nature of mind. We use the transformation of ordinary physical aspects to support the transformation of mind. If, over time, we purify the body, then all of our defilements and obscurations are purified. This naturally gives rise to the recognition of the nature of mind. The fruition will manifest as sambhogakaya—which has appearance, but no substance. It is buddha-essence released from physical matter. When we apply the concept of "secret" to certain aspects of these practices, it basically means "profound" or "inner," or what is more subtle than outer phenomena.

Knowledge-Wisdom Empowerment

From Guru Vajradhara's heart center comes a blue light that enters our Vajrayogini heart, purifying the negativities and obscurations of the mind: wrong or perverted views, hatred, monkey-mind indulgence, self-cherishing, ego-fixation, and so forth. This bestows the empowerment of wisdom and allows us to practice the union of bliss and emptiness.

The word *bliss* can create some confusion in ways similar to the word *happy,* especially in the West where bliss has been associated with psychedelic drugs, or with a kind of spaced-out goofiness, or some

transcendent state that denies all unpleasantness. Here bliss means that we are on the other side of dukkha. We have let go of our attachment to the way things should be. That doesn't mean our circumstances are perfect. It means that in the absence of clinging to what we want, we recognize the innate perfection of whatever arises. Here bliss implies an active, energized sense of joy, something a little stronger than emotional neutrality. There should be an animated, elated feeling of "Wow! I'm free."

The Word Empowerment

With the fourth empowerment, all three lights from the guru enter our Vajrayogini body at once, purifying the most subtle habitual tendencies, obscurations, and negativities of body, speech, and mind all at once, allowing us to receive oral teachings that directly point out the nature of mind. These oral teachings explain why we call this the word empowerment. Our ordinary mind is the mind of enlightenment, right now. We have this mind 24–7, and this mind is totally free from concepts, attachment, aversion, greed, and ignorance. The only obstacle? We do not recognize it. Here we set ourselves up for receiving "the word," or the Mahamudra practice of directly pointing out the nature of mind—the essence of Mahamudra.

The fruition of these empowerments is svabhavikakaya, the essence of all the kayas—the essence of everything. All of these empowerments take fruition as path. Wisdom is mixed in with the gross level of the body, as butter is inherent to milk. Once the impurities drain out, our wisdom mind flourishes, but we must know that we already have everything we need to work with.

Summary of the Four Empowerments

The four empowerments contain sixteen elements all together. The vase, secret, knowledge-wisdom, and word empowerments correspond to body, speech, and mind, and the union of body, speech, and mind.

Each empowerment bestows permission for four further practices: development stage practice follows the vase empowerment; completion stage practice follows the secret empowerment; the union of bliss and

emptiness follows the knowledge-wisdom empowerment; and the path of liberation follows the word empowerment.

Each empowerment plants the seed to manifest nirmanakaya, which corresponds to body; sambhogakaya, which corresponds to speech; dharmakaya, which corresponds to mind; svabhavikakaya, which corresponds to the union of body, speech, and mind.

Conclusion of Guru Yoga

At the end of the fourth empowerment, Guru Vajradhara melts into light and dissolves into us. We directly recognize, "I and the guru are one." We were never separate in the first place, but we didn't recognize that. Therefore we use relative reality—lights, dissolution, and so on—to support our recognition of absolute reality. We imagine separation in order to arrive at the recognition of unity. It's not just that we become one with the guru, but we become one with all sentient beings. In that moment, there are three transformations: our body and the bodies of all sentient beings become the guru's body; our speech and the speech of all sentient beings become the guru's speech; our mind and the minds of all sentient beings become the guru's mind. Even external phenomena—tables, trees, books, buildings, and so on—transform into dharmakaya. This is the taste of devotion, faith, compassion, and love, and it spreads to all phenomena. Everything arises from love, joy, and devotion. This is called transforming all phenomena into dharmakaya through guru yoga, and this comes after taking the empowerments.

If we take the empowerments intermittently throughout the session, then we should end the session with a final set of empowerments. Once we complete that, rest within this uncontrived union. Sit quietly with this state of mind for as long as possible. Then dedicate the merit to bring the session to a close.

Buy One . . .

The core benefit—what we sign on for with guru yoga—is an opportunity to experience our own true nature through faith and devotion to the guru. We do this by supplicating Vajradhara while imagining

that we are Vajrayogini. This is the essence of the practice. But again, we can also use guru yoga to cultivate shamata, to arouse bodhichitta, to contemplate emptiness, or to rest in the nature of mind. Guru Yoga is a powerful way to connect to the natural state of mind, so I particularly recommend merging our mind with the guru's from time to time throughout the practice, and just resting our mind in a natural, uncontrived way as we continue to recite the liturgy and to count the six-line invocation.

Signs of Change

The shift that comes about with guru yoga takes many forms because various aspects of previous practices begin to fall into place with greater meaning and depth. The cultivation of devotion tends to inspire our meditation, and as a result the mind in meditation tends to stay quieter for longer periods. This is the best sign that the practice is working. As we develop faith in the teacher, we develop faith in ourselves, and this invigorated confidence also strengthens our practice. That's how it works. And this invigorated confidence in our own capability also strengthens meditation practice.

In guru yoga, initially we see the guru as a buddha. This leads to seeing ourselves as a buddha, and then, with pure perception, we see all sentient beings as buddhas. With this understanding, the kleshas cannot maintain their usual power over our life. Pride, arrogance, anger, and so forth begin to diminish and shrink as our mind becomes less preoccupied with self-cherishing. This leaves us more available to clearly see, hear, and respond to the needs of others. As wisdom and compassion prevail over the mind, ego-fixation automatically diminishes.

There are many practices that we can do after completing ngondro. Yet basically they support and stabilize the path toward liberation that begins with ngondro. As I said at the beginning, many great masters have done ngondro many times, yet no two times are ever the same.

12. After Ngondro

When I was twenty years old, I traveled from Sherab Ling to Bhutan to visit Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. I had already received the first half of the Nyongtri teachings and had come to receive the second. But I arrived at Khen Rinpoche's house in Thimphu in a state of terrible confusion: I had received so many wonderful teachings that I did not know which one to do. I knew that nature-of-mind practice was the most important, yet I had also been taught that recognizing the true nature of mind is supported and enhanced by many methods, all of which are themselves presented as really important practices: deity yoga, subtle body practice, mandala offering, and many others.

Every time I learned a new practice, my teachers would tell me how profound and transformative it was, how it was absolutely necessary for my maturation, and that it contained the very essence of the Buddha's teaching. But at some point I began to wonder, "How can I possibly do all of these meditations? There are too many essential practices."

For months, every time I started one practice, I decided another would be better. If I chose a really elaborate version of mandala practice, I would decide that it would be more wise and humble to choose a simpler imagination practice. One day I would decide that my realization would be best supported by a simple practice, but then I was afraid of missing out on some critical aspect that might be included in a more complicated practice. Then I remembered hearing, "Renunciation is the most important aspect of dharma," so I would focus on that. But then I remembered hearing, "Bodhichitta is the most important," so I would switch to that. Then I would decide to delay the decision about which

practice to do until the perfect option presented itself. Soon I would scold myself for wasting time.

After six months of steady confusion, I went to visit Khen Rinpoche. We were together on the floor of his room. He never sat on a chair or slept on a raised bed, but always used floor mats. To the right of his mat was a large window through which I could see the entire city of Thimphu—a small, beautiful city. The window was open, allowing a gentle breeze into the room. As always, his mind seemed never to waver from awareness, and his eyes were filled with wisdom and kindness.

The room had many thangkas hanging on the walls, including images of Vajrasattva, Padmasambhava, Samantabhadra, and Amitabha. I was looking around at these enlightened beings and wondering which one offered the best practice. Then I explained, "I have no doubt that nature-of-mind teachings are the best. But I do not know the best practice to support that." I explained that for months I had been jumping from one practice to another with no confidence about which was best for my path. "Now I am fed up with all these wonderful possibilities," I told him, "but at the same time, I do not want to miss any important points. Do you have some advice for me?"

He answered with a story about Atisha. Khen Rinpoche told me that Atisha had been invited to Tibet by the king, who explained to Atisha that Buddhism in his country was not thriving. When dharma first came from India to Tibet a few hundred years earlier, it had strong political support and royal patronage. But then a king came to power who felt very threatened by the people's devotion to dharma, and he tried to wipe out Buddhism.

"The king did not want to compete with the Buddha," Khen Rinpoche explained, laughing. "He did not succeed, but the initial flourishing of the Buddha's teachings had deteriorated. Many subtle aspects of understanding had been lost, while others had become misunderstood. After this low point, a new king took over. He was determined to see dharma flourish in Tibet once again."

By this time Atisha already had a highly esteemed reputation for his perfect realization and his scholarship, as well as for his commitment to correcting distorted views. Atisha accepted the king's invitation and set

out for Tibet. Just after he crossed the western border he came to Ngari, home to the famous translator Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo. By that time, Rinchen Zangpo was an old man who had translated or revised more than one hundred texts. He had also been one of the monks sent to India by the Tibetan king to study Buddhist teachings and to learn Sanskrit as part of the program to reestablish dharma in Tibet. The two masters were very happy to meet, and they spent days discussing essential aspects of the Buddha's earliest teachings, the compassion of the great vehicle, and the wisdom teachings that had evolved in Tibet.

For every question that Atisha asked about Sanskrit texts or particular subtle points of Indian or Tibetan teachings, Rinchen Zangpo provided the perfect answer without one mistake. Atisha listened carefully, becoming increasingly impressed with Rinchen Zangpo's flawless understanding. Finally Atisha announced to Rinchen Zangpo, "With a great master like yourself in Tibet, there is no need for me to be here. I can just turn around and go back to India."

Rinchen Zangpo was very pleased, yet he respectfully begged Atisha to continue his journey. Atisha was considering this when he asked Rinchen Zangpo, "Tell me something: How do you bring all these important practices together?"

Rinchen Zangpo answered, "To accomplish that, I built a three-story house. In the morning, I practice the basic vehicle on the ground floor. At noontime, I go to the second floor and practice the great vehicle, and in the evening I go to the third floor and practice the vajra vehicle."

By the time Rinchen Zangpo finished his explanation, Atisha was laughing so hard that he could barely speak. Finally he said, "Now I understand why I need to be in Tibet!"

Then Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo asked Atisha, "How do you practice all three vehicles together?"

Atisha told him, "The foundation practice has two aspects: refuge and bodhichitta. The main practice has two aspects: wisdom and method. To conclude, we practice dedication. These five practices cover all the key points of the three *yanas*. That's enough. All of Buddhist dharma is here, and we do this on one cushion. Refuge represents the basic vehicle, bodhichitta represents the great vehicle, method and wisdom represent

the vajra vehicle. Method here can be understood as either shamata or deity practice. Wisdom is emptiness. Then end with dedication."

These teachings made Rinchen Zangpo very happy. He vowed to spend the rest of his life in retreat, and he continued to follow Atisha's teaching.

Then Khen Rinpoche told me, "This is the essential map. You cannot get lost. Once you know this map, you know the entire body of Buddhist dharma. Any teachings that you receive can be used to add details to your map."

After a short silence Khen Rinpoche asked, "Are you still wondering how these are all practiced on one cushion?" He did not wait for an answer but immediately continued: "Refuge is the gateway to the foundational teachings. Any practice begins with taking refuge. With refuge, we leave behind the confusion of samsara and keep our mind turned toward liberation. Yet when you know that the guru and the Buddha are the same, then practicing refuge becomes guru yoga.

After refuge, you set your motivation with bodhichitta, which is the gateway to the Mahayana. This defines our intention for every practice, and eventually for every daily life activity. Vajrasattva and mandala expand the view of Mahayana.

"Then come the main practices of the Vajrayana. The methods of working with deities stabilize our understanding of the union of form and emptiness, which is wisdom. The general method of Vajrayana is taking fruition as path. In guru yoga we become the enlightened deity Vajrayogini. In order to do this with any genuine conviction, we must understand the truth of emptiness, which is wisdom.

"This is the essence of all the deity practices that come after ngondro. Whichever practice you choose, the most important aspect is awareness. Awareness has everything. Once you recognize awareness, all the practices become profound. If you have not realized awareness, then even if you practice all sorts of wonderful methods, it will not really help. Then you dedicate the merit. Always end with dedicating the merit."

With Khen Rinpoche's words, I experienced an almost physical sense of anxiety leaving my body and mind. After that conversation I did many different practices, but I never again worried about which one

was best or if I was missing out on anything. With Khen Rinpoche's advice, I understood that all dharmas are one. No matter what form practice takes—shamata, deity practice, bodhichitta—the goal is the same: to liberate the ego from fixation, to go beyond concepts, to help others, and to recognize awareness.

The utmost inner core of our ngondro journey can be further condensed into three practices: the head, the heart, and the limb of practice. Refuge and bodhichitta together are the head of practice. The heart of practice is wisdom, which can be approached through emptiness, or nature-of-mind meditations. This is the essence of Vajrayana. In the end, we dedicate the merit, which is the limb of practice.

The four thoughts together inspire us to renounce samsara. Refuge practice affirms and deepens this renunciation. With renunciation, we see our potential. We feel hopeful about ourselves. The very possibility of freedom creates some energetic joy for our path. It's like seeing the waterfall on the other side of the desert: we are still thirsty, but the sight of water brings hope and happiness. With the outer refuge, we turn to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha for protection and guidance. For the inner refuge, we turn inward to our own wisdom and compassion. In both cases, we see that we have the same nature as the enlightened beings.

Bodhichitta sets our intention. Yet because bodhichitta itself purifies our negativities and obscurations, it includes the effects of Vajrasattva practice. And because bodhichitta accumulates merit and virtue, it includes the effects of mandala practice. And as Khen Rinpoche said, once we perceive the guru as the Buddha, then refuge and guru yoga become one practice.

At this point, you may be wondering if practicing the four thoughts and Vajrasattva and so forth is sort of going backward. "Why should I do all those other practices when I can just do refuge, bodhichitta, and dedication?"

As I mentioned earlier, my father said that becoming enlightened is a process of discovering ourselves. Every practice offers a specific way of bringing to our attention different parts of our true nature, aspects that have been covered over and obscured. But we come to this path

with different personalities, needs, and aptitudes. An essential map is offered with the suggestion that we explore the territory of buddhadharma—which is the same as exploring ourselves—as completely as possible to find out what works and what doesn't.

What really helps stabilize our renunciation and realization? Even a guru cannot always tell us exactly what to do with our practice. The exploration of what works must come from our side. And then do not forget what Khen Rinpoche said about recognizing awareness. Recognizing awareness adds a deeper dimension to every practice. With awareness, all the practices become profound.

Dreams and Prophecies

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche's teacher's teacher, Khenpo Ngawang Palzang, was the master who had been conferred with the authority to teach the Nyongtri lineage to more than one student in a lifetime. It was prophesized that when Khenpo Ngawang Palzang received these teachings, the time had arrived for them to be disseminated more widely. Then while Khenpo Ngawang Palzang himself was receiving these teachings, he had a prophetic dream.

In his dream an enormous stupa covered the entire area of Tibet. He was told that the Buddhist king of India, Ashoka, had built it. Suddenly the western part of the stupa cracked and split off. From the top of the stupa, everything began to crumble and fall as if an earthquake was shaking the ground underneath. Pieces toppled over, scattered, and rolled down from the mountains until they fell into the ocean, which turned bright red. Then a voice from the sky said: "Ten million beings in the ocean will achieve direct realization."

The big stupa in the dream represents Tibetan Buddhism. That King Ashoka built the stupa means that Buddhism in Tibet came from India. The stupa falling to the west foretells that Buddhism in Tibet would be destroyed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, but would move toward the west and spread throughout the world. The ocean is outside of Tibet, yet it turned red, the primary color of Tibetan Buddhism. This means that Vajrayana is being carried away from its native land

by ocean waters. The "ten million beings" refer to people throughout the world, far away from Tibet. To achieve direct realization means to be enlightened.

It is my aspiration as well that the destruction of so much dharma inside Tibet transforms into immeasurable benefit for beings throughout the entire world.

I sincerely hope that this book offers instructive guidance. Perhaps as a reader new to Buddhism, you have learned something helpful. That would be wonderful. Maybe you are already thinking about your mind in new ways. If anything has been helpful, if you can identify any wisdom in these pages, please consider dedicating this merit to others.

Shakyamuni Buddha spoke of the incomparable benefits that come to anyone who reads or hears just four lines of dharma. So rejoice in the fact that you have devoted your precious time to these teachings. Just as with the practice itself, you don't want to keep the merit and wisdom for yourself, or to use dharma to add another hat to your head. You want to give it away for the benefit of all beings. Even as a silent wish, you might think, "I dedicate anything I have learned to others, so that they may be free from confusion in their lives and develop wisdom and clarity, and may suffering be transformed into peace."

Glossary

Key: Skt.: Sanskrit Tib.: Tibetan

absolute reality *See* emptiness.

Atisha (980–1054) Indian adept, scholar, and translator of Buddhist texts; instrumental in the transmission of the dharma from India to Tibet.

awareness The innate, ever-present, knowing quality of mind. Although there is only one awareness, varying expressions are classified in terms of normal awareness, meditative awareness, and pure awareness.

basic vehicle The teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha that emphasize the three marks of existence: no-self, impermanence, and suffering.

Bodh Gaya Site of the *bodhi* tree in the Indian state of Bihar, identified as the place where the historical Buddha Shakyamuni became enlightened.

bodhi (Skt.) Enlightenment. *See* bodhichitta.

bodhichitta (Skt.) Mind of enlightenment. Absolute bodhichitta refers to the enlightened mind that directly recognizes emptiness. Used in the absolute sense, bodhichitta is interchangeable with buddhahood, awakening, enlightenment, the realization of emptiness, and the recognition of boundless, indivisible, sky-like awareness.

Relative bodhichitta works with concepts and dualities in order to attain our goal of absolute bodhichitta. Within relative bodhichitta are aspiration and application bodhichitta. Aspiration bodhichitta refers to the determined intention to help all sentient beings become enlightened and liberated from suffering. Application bodhichitta refers to the ways in which we put our aspirations into practice. In traditional teachings, application bodhichitta is the practice of the six perfections. *See* paramitas.

bodhisattva (Skt.) One who works ceaselessly to help all sentient beings to be free from suffering and to become buddhas.

buddha (Skt.) Enlightened being. One who wakes up to the true nature of reality.

Buddha (Skt.) *See* Shakyamuni.

buddha nature (Skt.) The fundamental basic goodness, wisdom, and compassion inherent to all sentient beings; the ultimate nature of reality that we uncover on the spiritual path.

buddhadharma (Skt.) Commonly refers to Buddhist teachings.

buddhahood (Skt.) Used interchangeably with enlightenment, awakening, and the direct realization of absolute reality; the actualization of buddha nature, a state of having eliminated all obscurations, negativities, and delusions, and transcended the dualities of samsara and nirvana.

calm abiding (Skt.: shamata) Refers to a mind that abides in its own steadiness, independent of external circumstances; cultivated through meditative awareness.

clarity An inherent aspect of awareness; the knowing quality of mind.

compassion An inherent quality of buddha nature or basic goodness; its ultimate expression is accessed through the wisdom of emptiness.

dakas and dakinis (Skt.) The male and female manifestations of enlightened activity.

dharma (Skt.) This term has many different meanings, including "the law" and "phenomena"; most commonly, it refers to the Buddhist teachings. This appears as "Dharma" when the author is discussing the three jewels together: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

dharma protectors (Skt.: dharmapala) Manifestations of enlightened activity that remove obstacles and safeguard experiences and realization for those on the path of awakening.

dharmakaya (Skt.) The body of dharma; the emptiness-wisdom aspect of enlightened reality; formless, uncontrived, sky-like spaciousness.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–91) Born in Tibet, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche is regarded as one of the greatest Tibetan masters of the ages. Following the Chinese takeover of Tibet, he was instrumental in maintaining the continuity of the teachings for the Tibetan communities of monks and laypeople in exile, as well as bringing Buddhism to the West.

dukkha (Skt.) Suffering and dissatisfaction; a state of mind that creates and perpetuates mental anguish by identifying with negative reactivity. Liberation comes from recognizing that suffering is not intrinsic to one's basic nature.

eight freedoms Freedom from eight restrictive states. The foundation practices include contemplations on eight circumstances that restrict the capacity to attain enlightenment; when human beings are born free of these restrictions, they have an unlimited capacity for awakening.

empowerment A ceremony, often in a ritual form, through which the teacher-guru helps one recognize an aspect of one's enlightened nature and empowers one to undertake specific practices that help generate the realization of this quality.

emptiness The underlying nature of all phenomena, which indicates that they have no inherent, independent identity; used interchangeably with the term *absolute reality.*

enlightenment A state of being in which one's buddha nature—the union of clarity and emptiness—has been fully realized.

foundation practices *See* ngondro.

four immeasurables The aspiration that all sentient beings have happiness and its causes; that they be free from suffering and its causes; that they never be parted from the sublime bliss free from suffering, (which means they never suffer from the incapacity to rejoice in the well-being of others), and that they live in equanimity free from attachment and aversion to those near and far.

Four Noble Truths The first teaching of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha: the truth of suffering, the truth of the causes of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, the truth of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering—also called the eightfold path.

fruition The enlightenment, or the end of suffering, that is the goal of Buddhist practice. In Vajrayana, fruition is taken as path (rather than cause); the path starts with the truth of original enlightenment, and the dharma path is a means to this realization.

guru (Skt.) A spiritual teacher or guide.

guru yoga (Skt.) The final foundation practice, which emphasizes the intrinsic inseparability between the student's true nature and the enlightened essence of the guru.

Heart Sutra (Skt.: Prajnaparamita) Also known as the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra.* A Buddhist text known for teaching that "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form; form is not other than emptiness, and emptiness not other than form." This teaching shows that although phenomena appear, they are devoid of any true, substantial nature.

imagination In this text, the conventional use of the term *visualization* is often replaced with *imagination.* In either case, it is the intentional mental fabrication of specific forms as aids to practice.

impermanence All conditioned phenomena change; everything that arises will dissolve. Our usual attempts to fix in place all that inevitably changes denies the truth of impermanence and creates the suffering of samsara.

Kagyu One of the four main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism.

karma (Skt.) The principle of cause and effect in which virtuous actions intended to diminish suffering for oneself and others are the cause of future positive experiences, while nonvirtuous actions cause negative experiences. "Future" may be the next moment, year, or lifetime.

kaya (Skt.) Body, in the sense of a body of thought, or a grouping or gathering together of related qualities. *See also* three kayas, dharmakaya, nirmanakaya, sambhogakaya.

klesha (Skt.) Defilement. A destructive mental state, such as anger or greed, which obscures original goodness and purity.

luminous The inherent knowing quality of awareness.

Mahamudra (Skt.) "Great Seal." The meditation tradition of the Kagyu lineage, which emphasizes recognizing the essential nature of one's own mind, and training in that experience.

Mahayana (Skt.) The great vehicle (*maha* means "great," *yana* means "vehicle"); a movement within Buddhism that started in India at the beginning of the Common Era and that emphasizes compassion and working toward enlightenment for the benefit of all beings; also called the path of the bodhisattva.

mala (Skt.) The string of 108 beads that allows practitioners to keep count of mantras and prayers.

mandala (Skt.) A sacred circle; an all-encompassing perfected universe, an edgeless realm with no beginning and no end; mandalas may refer to a category of pictorial representations of sacred realms used as visual aids for specific practices. Mandala practice is one of the unique foundation practices; "mandala" may also refer to the ritual plate or circular plate used to support mandala practice.

mantra (Skt.) *Man* means "mind," and *tra* means "protection"; a sequence of Sanskrit syllables understood to embody the wisdom of a particular deity; recited in repetitions as prayer, supplication, or invocation.

meditation Working with the mind in an intentional way in order to recognize its inherently wakeful qualities.

meditative awareness Awareness that recognizes its own presence.

Milarepa (1040–1123) Tibet's most widely beloved saint, famous for solitary practice in Himalayan caves and for direct teaching through songs.

monkey-mind The mind that chatters to itself uncontrollably and cannot let go of self-preoccupation.

mudra (Skt.) A ritual gesture associated with, but not limited to, the hands and fingers.

Nagi Gompa A nunnery in the Kathmandu Valley, and the hermitage of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche.

naked awareness A thought-free state of mind in which awareness recognizes itself, free from the filters of concepts, memories, and associations.

Naropa (1016–1100) The second enlightened master of the Kagyu lineage. An exceptional scholar and dialectician at the famed Nalanda University in Bihar, India, who, having confronted his imperfect understanding, abandoned his secure position to study with the eccentric master Tilopa.

ngondro (Tib.) That which comes first; the foundation practices of Tibetan Buddhism that help us to cross over from confusion to clarity.

nirmanakaya (Skt.) The embodied form of enlightenment; from *nirmana,* which means "to manifest," and *kaya,* which means "body." A nirmanakaya buddha is accessible to ordinary people using ordinary sense perceptions, as was the case with Shakyamuni Buddha.

nirvana (Skt.) A state of mind that has been liberated from the ignorance and delusions that define conventional reality and that has realized its true nature, which is boundless, luminous, and free from suffering.

Noble Sangha *See* Sangha.

normal awareness The way that we relate to awareness before beginning to work with our mind; awareness without recognition of awareness itself.

Nyongtri lineage (Tib.) A lineage within Vajrayana that is transmitted to one student at a time in a process called "experiential teachings;" Mingyur Rinpoche received the Nyongtri lineage transmission from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche (1932–99) Nyoshul Khen overcame harsh circumstances to become a learned, influential, and deeply loved master. He narrowly survived his escape from Tibet and many years later settled in Thimpu, Bhutan. One of Mingyur Rinpoche's four main teachers.

paramitas (Skt.) The six perfections or qualities that help us cross over from samsara to nirvana: generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation and wisdom. Also called the transcendent perfections, because, as the six primary methods of application bodhichitta, they are the natural expression of the wisdom of emptiness.

pointing-out instructions Personal oral teachings in which the teacher points out to the student the nature of his or her own mind. In this text, Mingyur Rinpoche explains how students who have already received these instructions can apply them to the foundation practices.

preliminary practices *See* ngondro. The traditional term used for ngondro but in this text, it is replaced by "foundation practices."

pure awareness The recognition of both the presence and the nature of awareness.

pure perception The experience of all sensory perception as manifestations of absolute or enlightened reality.

recognition Waking up; being cognizant of what is happening internally and externally as it is happening.

rinpoche (Tib.) Precious one; a term of respect.

Saljay Rinpoche (1910–99) The retreat master at Sherab Ling from about 1985 to the end of his life. He completed his training at Palpung Monastery in Tibet under the guidance of the Eleventh Tai Situ Rinpoche. Following the Chinese invasion, he fled to Sikkim where he remained until the Sixteenth Karmapa passed away; afterward he went to Sherab Ling to be near the Twelfth Tai Situ Rinpoche. He was Mingyur Rinpoche's retreat master and one of his four main teachers.

samaya (Skt.) A vow or oath particular to Vajrayana that is undertaken through empowerments and applies to a vast number of precepts; commonly used in association with an unwavering trust that a student places in a guru.

sambhogakaya (Skt.) The radiant clarity aspect of enlightened reality, which is depicted by deities who manifest as transparent displays of light and color similar to holography.

samsara (Skt.) Spinning; going in circles. A state of mind trapped in cyclic existence; a mental state that binds itself to desire and delusion; the world of confusion.

sangha (Skt.) The noble sangha refers to the community of enlightened beings; the ordinary sangha refers to friends who share a dharma path. This appears as "Sangha" when the author is discussing the three jewels together: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

sentient beings All beings throughout the six realms of samsara; the sentient manifestation of cyclic existence defined by ignorance and suffering.

shamata (Skt.) *See* calm abiding.

Shakyamuni The historical Buddha (ca. 566–485). His renunciation of the conventional world of confusion and his determination to recognize the cause and cessation of suffering have inspired and shaped all subsequent traditions of Buddhism to this day.

Shantideva The eighth-century Indian saint whose studies at Nalanda University were considered mediocre until he gave an address to an assembly of monks. The extraordinary teachings that poured forth are known as the *Bodhicharyavatara,* or *The Way of the Bodhisattva.* Celebrated for being brilliant, succinct, and intimate, this text continues to be widely studied, taught, and revered by Buddhists all over the world.

six realms The realms of samsaric existence that describe mental states such as anger, greed, and ignorance. The three lower realms are hell, the hungry ghost, and the animal realms. The three higher realms are the human, demi-god, and god realms.

stupa (Skt.) A rounded structure that represents the mind of the Buddha; often built to house relics of enlightened beings.

suffering *See* dukkha.

Tai Situ Rinpoche (born 1954) Recognized as the Twelfth Tai Situ by the Sixteenth Karmapa, who oversaw his enthronement at Palpung Monastery in eastern Tibet and who shepherded him to safety at age six (alongside the Sixth Mingyur Rinpoche) following the Chinese invasion. Eventually he settled near Bir in northwestern India and developed Sherab Ling Monastery, where Mingyur Rinpoche began studying at age eleven. Today he oversees a vast network of Kagyu monasteries, retreat centers, and dharma centers worldwide, making an enormous contribution to the continued flourishing of Tibetan dharma. He is one of Mingyur Rinpoche's four main teachers.

ten endowments Qualities and conditions inherent in myriad human births that provide the opportunity for awakening; contemplations used in the first foundation practice.

three jewels The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

three kayas nirmanakaya, sambhogakaya, and dharmakaya

three roots The sources of refuge, along with the three jewels, in the Vajrayana tradition. *See also* guru, yidam, and dharma protector.

Tilopa (989–1069). Eccentric Indian yogi whose teachings to Naropa (1016–1100) initiated the Kagyu lineage.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche (born 1966) Like his younger brother Mingyur Rinpoche, he was born in Nepal. His accessible teaching style draws on his deep meditative experience and his sustained engagement with the modern world. The married father of two daughters, he travels extensively while overseeing two nunneries in Nepal, one of the largest nunneries in Tibet, and more than fifty practice centers and hermitages in the eastern region of Tibet. His latest book, written with Eric Swanson, is *Open Heart, Open Mind: Awakening the Power of Essence Love.*

tulku (Tib.) The rebirth of someone who had attained spiritual accomplishments and is therefore considered especially endowed with the potential for spiritual development.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (1920–96) One of the most highly regarded meditation masters of the last century; born in Kham, he came to Nepal following the Chinese invasion of Tibet and established two monasteries and many teaching

centers; he resided at Nagi Gompa in the Kathmandu Valley. Today his legacy is carried forth by his sons Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, Tsikey Chokling Rinpoche, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. One of Mingyur Rinpoche's four main teachers.

turning the wheel of dharma Teaching the dharma; keeping Buddhist teachings fresh and alive by expounding and reintroducing dharma to sentient beings throughout history.

vajra (Skt.) Diamond-like, adamantine thunderbolt, symbol of the indestructible truth of dharma, capable of dispelling all ignorance and delusion; a ritual object symbolizing compassion and skillful means, used in conjunction with a ritual bell, symbol of wisdom and emptiness.

Vajradhara (Skt.) The primordial Buddha, who represents emptiness, the essence of the enlightened state. In this text, Vajradhara is seen as the embodiment of the dharmakaya. Though the dharmakaya is beyond concepts and form, Vajradhara is blue in color to represent the sky-like, boundless qualities of our true nature. This image exemplifies the use of form to go beyond form, and the use of visualization to go beyond all that is conceivable.

Vajrasattva (Skt.). A meditation deity who symbolizes purification.

Vajrayana (Skt.) The vehicle for Buddhist teachings that is grounded in the view that the path of awakening is a process of recognizing that enlightenment, or buddhahood, is not a goal to achieve, but rather an immanent reality that can only be recognized in the present moment. This approach is primarily associated with Tibetan schools of Buddhism, though it is also found in some schools of Japanese Buddhism.

Vajrayogini (Skt.) A meditation deity used in the practice of guru yoga; the essence of all buddhas and, as the divine mother, the source of all buddhas.

vinaya (Skt.) Shakyamuni Buddha's collected teachings on discipline and appropriate behavior for the ordained community; a monastic rule book that, to this day, guides Buddhist monasticism.

vipashyana (Skt.) Insight; clear seeing. Vipashyana meditation emphasizes that the recognition of all that appears arises from emptiness; it is inseparable from emptiness, and it dissolves into emptiness. Vipashyana is the direct, experiential insight that all experience does indeed appear, yet cannot be captured by words and concepts, and so is fundamentally as ungraspable and groundless as space.

wisdom In Tibetan teachings, wisdom specifically relates to the recognition of one's buddha nature, the union of emptiness and clarity.

yana (Skt.) Vehicle; a means for following a Buddhist path or tradition. The history and teachings of Buddhism are conventionally divided into the Foundational, (*see* basic teachings) Mahayana, and Vajrayana vehicles.

yidam (Tib.) In the Vajrayana tradition, yidams are enlightened beings that serve as the basis for specific meditation practices; as aids to practice, they may appear as external forms, but ultimately are experienced as manifestations of mind.

Recommended Reading

Texts on the Foundation Practices of Tibetan Buddhism

Chagdud Tulku. *Ngondro Commentary: Instructions for the Concise Preliminary Practices of the New Treasure of Dudjom.* Junction City, Calif.: Padma, 1995.

Dahl, Cortland. *Entrance to the Great Perfection: A Guide to the Dzogchen Preliminary Practices.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2009.

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———. *Guru Yoga: According to the Preliminary Practice of Longchen Nyingtik.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999.

———. *The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel: The Practice of Guru Yoga according to the Longchen Nyingtik Tradition.* Boston: Shambhala, 1999.

Dudjom Rinpoche. *A Torch Lighting the Way to Freedom: Complete Instructions of the Preliminary Practices.* Boston: Shambhala, 2011.

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse. *Not for Happiness: A Guide to the So-Called Preliminary Practices.* Boston: Shambhala, 2012.

Jamgon Kongtrul. *The Torch of Certainty.* Boston: Shambhala, 2000.

Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang. *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher.* Boston: Shambhala, 2004.

Patrul Rinpoche. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher.* Boston: Shambhala, 1998.

Thinley Norbu. *A Cascading Waterfall of Nectar.* Boston: Shambhala, 2006.

Credits

Photographs

Pages 4, 15, 39, 47, 94, 102, 103, 150, 195, 291: Early photographs of Mingyur Rinpoche, members of his family, and his teachers are in the private collection of Mingyur Rinpoche. Photographers unknown. Courtesy of Mingyur Rinpoche.

Page 118: Photograph of Mingyur Rinpoche in his quarters at Sherab Ling by Alex Campbell. Courtesy of Alex Campbell.

Page 64: Photograph of Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche by Matthieu Ricard. Courtesy of Shechen Archives.

Page 91: Photograph of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche by Matthieu Ricard. Courtesy of Shechen Archives.

Page 59: Photograph of Tai Situ Rinpoche by Marie Sepulchre. Courtesy of Marie Sepulchre.

Page 211: Photograph of Sonam Chödrön and Tashi Dorje by Tim Olmsted. Courtesy of Tim Olmsted.

Drawings

Pages 8, 9, 24, 244, 267, 271: Ink drawings on paper by Gyalpo Urgyen, 2013. Courtesy of Tergar International.

Painting

Page 162: Painting of the refuge field of the Karma Kagyu lineage. Mineral pigment on cotton, artist unknown, from eastern Tibet, ca. 1921. Courtesy of Himalayan Art Resources. Detail reproductions showing images of Shantideva, Milarepa, Atisha, Shakyamuni Buddha, Vajradhara, the Eleventh Tai Situ Rinpoche, Vajrasattva, and Vajrayogini are taken from this painting. For further information, visit: www.himalayanart.org/image.cfm/65861.html.

Texts

In the foreword:

Rangdrol, S. T. *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin.* (M. Ricard and Padmakara Translation Group, trans.) Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2001.

Ricard, Matthieu. *On the Path to Enlightenment: Heart Advice from the Great Tibetan Masters.* Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2013.

Jigme Lingpa. *Treasury of Precious Qualities.* Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Inc. Boston, MA. www.shambhala.com.

Other quotations in the foreword are original translations into English from Tibetan by Matthieu Ricard.

In *Turning Confusion into Clarity:*

Excerpts by Shantideva from *The Way of the Bodhisattva.* Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group. (Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

Quotations from the foundation practices (ngondro) liturgy are from Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé, *Nectar of the Simple Yogi.* Translated by Cortland Dahl under the direction of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. Unpublished manuscript, 2007. Written in the nineteenth century by one of Tibet's greatest spiritual luminaries, this liturgy is used as a basis for the contemplative and meditative practices of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Courtesy of Tergar International.

The quotations attributed to Shakyamuni Buddha in chapter 2 and in chapter 6 are excerpted from *Thus I Have Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha.* Translated by Maurice Walshe (London: Wisdom, 1987).

Author Biographies

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, born in Nepal in 1975, is the youngest son of the celebrated meditation master Tulku Urgyen. He began his formal monastic studies at the age of eleven and two years later entered his first three-year retreat. Today his teachings integrate the practical and philosophical disciplines of Tibetan training with the scientific and psychological orientations of the West. Mingyur Rinpoche now oversees the Tergar Meditation Community with groups throughout Asia, Europe, and the Americas, and with monasteries in Nepal, Tibet, and India. Author of the acclaimed *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret & Science of Happiness* and *Joyful Wisdom: Embracing Change and Finding Freedom*, both written with Eric Swanson, Mingyur Rinpoche began his third three-year retreat in 2011. For further information about his teachings and centers, visit www.tergar.org.

Helen Tworkov is the founder of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* and author of *Zen in America: Profiles of Five Teachers*. Having first encountered Buddhism in Japan and Nepal during the 1960s, she has studied in both the Zen and Tibetan traditions. She began studying with Mingyur Rinpoche in 2006.

About the Tergar Meditation Community

Under the guidance of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche and Tergar International, the Tergar Meditation Community is an international network of centers and practice groups that provide comprehensive courses of meditation training and study for Buddhists and non-Buddhists. To learn about programs and locations, visit www.tergar.org.

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About the Yongey Foundation

The Yongey Foundation supports Mingyur Rinpoche's projects worldwide. All proceeds from this book will go toward the education and support of nuns and monks living in Mingyur Rinpoche's monasteries in India, Nepal, and Tibet. To learn more, visit www.yongeyfoundation.org.

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